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THOSE WHO COME AFTER

THOSE WHO COME AFTER

By

HENRY LEGEND

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To

THE PERFECT WOMAN

All the characters in this book are fictional

CONTENTS

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER		PAGE
1.	The Squire Goes to London upon an Unpleasant Errand	3
2.	John Blake Remembers a Woman Who is Dead	9
3.	The Misses Fawks Express Their Regret	21
4.	The House of the Tragedy	29
5.	Arthur St. Just Hears a Confession	39
6.	Ghosts Make no Merry Christmas	45
7.	At the Police-court	54
8.	At East Banstead	64
9.	The Squire Passes	69
10.	Sophie Fordacre Goes to Paris	76
11.	The Review at Longchamp	89
12.	Philip Hart-Brown Hears the Truth	95
13.	The Affair Takes a Dangerous Turn	102
14.	Good-bye to Paris	111
15.	Sophie's Resolution	121
16.	Wedding-Bells—and Others	129

CONTENTS

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER		PAGE
17.	JOHN BLAKE GOES TO CAMBRIDGE	139
18.	JOHN GETS A CERTIFICATE	150
19.	WE HEAR ABOUT RELIGION	165
20.	JOHN GOES TO PARIS	171
21.	THE THEATRE IS TAKEN	183
22.	SOPHIE COMES TO EUROPE	200
23.	INCOGNITO IN LONDON	210
24.	AT ASNIÈRES	222
25.	SOME NEW FRIENDS	229
26.	WE HEAR OF JOHN BLAKE AGAIN	238
27.	JEREMY HOOKER TRIES HIS HAND	261
28.	THE TRAGEDY AT THE FOLIGNY	271
29.	THAT TERRIBLE AFFAIR	284
30.	THE GUARDIANS	291

BOOK THREE

31.	THE CHILDREN OF THE MARRIAGE	309
32.	ANOTHER CHILD IS EDUCATED	330
33.	CARMEN	342

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

THE SQUIRE GOES TO LONDON UPON AN UNPLEASANT ERRAND

THE train was to leave New Street at six o'clock of the evening, but by half-past two of the afternoon, John Blake was already in his red-wheeled dog-cart driving through the muddy lanes from Quainton to that great railway station in Birmingham which was the pride alike of the town and the county.

A wide cape covered the Squire's massive shoulders and a spurious Glengarry cap of a pattern to match it hid what was left of his once fair hair. He was fifty-six years of age and trouble sat at his elbow while he drove.

"Summat on Squire's mind—summat more than ordinary —that's what there be," the groom by his side would have said if all his thoughts had been uttered aloud.

How well that servant of twenty years' standing knew his master, who now brooded through the familiar country and had eyes neither for dell nor dale. Yet the wind was warm and the rain not unkindly; and away, somewhere beyond Pearman's spinneys, the hounds should be killing their second fox. William would gladly have been there with the second horse he had nursed so cunningly. This London, surely, was no place at all when hunting was but a month old and the coverts so full of foxes that a man might tumble over them.

The Squire, indeed, thought neither of huntsmen nor of hounds, though the dead past, for which he mourned, had found in them the settings alike of its comedies and its tragedies.

The vision of a woman was conjured up by a mind which perplexity had quickened and grave apprehension had assailed. And this woman had ridden her white horse through these very woods when the red gold of autumn was passing. The very birds had welcomed her coming, he thought; for had she not been the true child of fair arbours, the daughter of delight in all that life was or should be. But she had been dead these seventeen years . . . and that odd old man, their popish Vicar, still prayed for her soul and said she was a saint in very truth.

The Squire knew she was no saint but did not cry the fact aloud in the tabernacles.

"A damned sight too good for me," he had admitted; and that was a just estimate. Perhaps, for a moment, his mind dwelled upon the thought that it was well both for him and for her, that she was not alive that day. The disgrace of it would have affected her sorely—she, the daughter of the Lord of Mount Ferrers, and her sister a Countess. What would he have said to her when the world pointed its finger at his own niece and believed her to be a murderess.

"Damn them all," he muttered to himself when he thought of it, "how can they say it—what right have they?" The coroner brings in murder against some person unknown and the jury agree. What right has anyone to be naming folks? And my own child to suffer for her. God in heaven, is that justice? I'll ask any man if it is. . . ."

William, by his side, heard these mutterings and could make little of them.

News travelled slowly in those days and but one paper a week came to Quainton Grange . . . and that only when the postman could find somebody who would give him a lift

to carry it. The Vicar alone had the whole story and he was schooled in secrecy.

An odd man, who dreamed dreams of heaven when the sun shone through the stained-glass windows and he perceived angels in the aureole of those candles, which raised such a burning controversy between his far from devoted flock and himself. He was one of the old Tractarians, "the salt of the earth" as a great Dean was to call them in later years . . . and his parishioners knew so little of him after his ten years service to them, that they verily believed he supped with the devil when the moon was full.

It befell that the Vicar, a son of old Sir Robert St. Just, who was born in Jersey seventy years before, stood at his gate as the Squire drove up, and was evidently desirous of having a word with him. Blake reined in the big chestnut mare when he saw the parson and knew without parley what the subject of his discourse would be. His niece, of course. The murderess! Oh, surely, the whole parish would talk of nothing else for many a long day to come.

"Ha, Vicar, you have some news?"

Arthur St. Just wore a frowsy old cassock and a Roman collar, which that pious lady Mary Frobisher, the spinster of Quainton, declared to be the unanswerable evidence of his submission to the Evil One.

He had heard the rumbling of the iron-shod wheels upon the gravel road and knew that the Squire must be setting out for London to carry his accused niece back with him and, perhaps, to bring his daughter Lucy, as well.

A Christian act, he thought, and worthy of a man who, whatever his sins, and they had been many, was at any rate the servant of charity and a warm heart.

Nevertheless, he wondered if his errand might not be, in some part, vain. Was Sophie, at whom all the world now pointed its finger, was she still in London or had she tried to hide herself from all observation and pursuit? The

Vicar wondered, but did not know how to express his doubts.

"I was thinking, Squire, that perhaps I might be of service at this time," he now began. "If there is anything I can do, you know how willingly I will do it."

"Ay, friend, it's kind of you, but there's nothing any man can do that I know of. You'll have to read the coroner's report in your *Times* newspaper and know almost as much about it as I do. They found the little lad strangled in the shrubbery behind the South Kensington house, and many say the nurse, Harriet, never liked him and must have had something to do with it. That's as may be. Why my little niece, Sophie, should be named in the matter, God only knows. A young woman of twenty-one isn't very likely to be jealous of a child of five, and Sophie always had a heart for children you couldn't beat. Her half-brother, too, and yet some say that she murdered him. Did you read the questions the detective fellow asked her? She might have been a kitchenmaid who had put a knife into a soldier from the way he went on. Damn him, I wish I had him here now with this whip in my hand——"

The Vicar said: "Come, come," for he was a man of peace and all oaths were abhorrent to him. Moreover, he was very sorry for the Squire for a particular reason he would never have mentioned, and he feared that there was greater trouble before him than had yet been imagined. So he diverted the issue by raising questions which there was no real necessity to ask.

"Your sister Sophie died some seven years ago, did she not? This was her child, I understand?"

"Yes, her only child. She died two years after my poor wife; and her husband, Greville Fordacre, married exactly eleven months after her death . . . an Italian actress, I believe, and a pretty bad one at that, though I've never set eyes on the woman and never will. They had two children

and the boy is the elder . . . called Greville after his father and better out of the way, perhaps, though God knows I wish him no harm."

The Vicar said: "Indeed, I am sure you do not," and said it with much earnestness. He knew the story of the Fordacres very well; but he had never seen the Squire's niece, Sophie, and it was about her that he was really anxious. The coroner's jury had returned an open verdict and so at the moment there was no charge against anybody. How much he hoped that there never would be.

"I was away when Miss Sophie came to visit her cousin last summer—in the Whitsun holiday, I think. Is she at all like your daughter, Squire? Hardly, I suppose, since Lucy is such an uncommon beauty. There could not be her match in any family in Warwickshire. Yet the newspapers say that your niece is remarkably gifted——"

"They speak the truth, Vicar. A red-haired little vixen, she is, with a face like one of the cherubims in Joshua Reynolds' pictures. How the men pass her by I don't know . . . for there was more than one after her when she was but fifteen. Yet there she is . . . twenty-one last June, and unless it's me, she hasn't a friend in the world. What do you make of that when a girl is all a man could desire and more . . . and she not without money, mind you, for she is to have ten thousand pounds when she's twenty-five, and that's but four years away whatever we may say or do. . . ."

The Vicar said: "Certainly," and added that we could not change the hour though we might move the hands of the clock: and as though to emphasize the wisdom of the platitude, the bells in the tower near by began to strike three while he spoke and the Squire bestirred himself when he heard them.

"I'll be losing the train if I stop gossiping here, damned if I won't," he ejaculated . . . and then with a "good-bye, Vicar, and thank you for your words," he touched the chest-

nut mare with his whip and she bounded forward, on her way to Birmingham, some ten miles distant.

The Vicar watched the dog-cart until it was out of sight . . . but his heart was heavy and doubt still weighed upon him. "Will she come back?" he was asking himself . . . and then, as though vainly trying to convince himself, he said, "no, no, it must have been another. . . . I am wrong to believe any such thing."

Twice that day had his devoted man-servant, Jacob, told him that a young lady had called to see him and evidently had been in a great state of distress. He knew nobody in the neighbourhood to whom such a description might apply.

And so he entered his little church; and alone before the altar there, he prayed for Sophie Fordacre . . . and for himself, that he might follow the path of his duty wherever it should lead him.

CHAPTER II

JOHN BLAKE REMEMBERS A WOMAN WHO IS DEAD

Squire Blake went to London almost every month; and if his men friends were asked why he went, they laughed. The lady, they said, was a dancer at the Alhambra Palace in Leicester Square: and they wondered at such a "low" amour. The Squire, in his turn, rejoined that he did not care a damn who knew about it as long as the Vicar of Quainton did not.

"A man's a man," he would observe . . . and his logic seemed to be unanswerable.

As it befell, he met one of these friends at New Street station, Philip Hart-Brown, the lawyer: a burly, bearded man, running to fat and flippancy; but as sound a solicitor as could be found even among the sagacious practitioners of that sagacious town of Birmingham. Philip was going to London, and neither had any necessity to inquire what the other's errand might be.

"Fordacre has sent for me," Philip admitted, as they shook hands upon a vast platform of that proud terminus . . . "seems to think there will be a charge against the maid Harriet and I had better be there. Sophie's with you, I understand . . . all well, I hope, and cheerful?"

His little odd eyes peered curiously from his fat face when he asked the question, as though "cheerfulness" were less in his mind than doubt. The Squire, in his turn, was very much astonished. Why had he thought that his niece, Sophie, was at the Grange when he had not heard a word from her.

"Not with me, certainly not. What made you think so?"

"Why, Fordacre says so—left yesterday for Warwickshire. Where the devil else could she be if she isn't with you?"

"She'll have gone to her cousins at Moseley, I expect," he said after a little thought; "my brother Robert's children. She was always a favourite of theirs and, they did say, a little too free with the boy, John. Wonder she didn't come to me, though. Must have known I was the one to stand by her . . . well, well, it's all a dreadful business Philip, and God knows how it will end. . . ."

"Say no such thing, my boy," the lawyer retorted heartily; "nothing but good comes out of innocence and that your niece is as innocent as I am, you and I know very well. You're stopping at Bond's as usual, I suppose. That's good, for we shall be able to talk about it . . . when you aren't at the dancing. Eh, sly dog . . . still liking them on their toes, I'll be bound. Well, well, it's human nature and I should be the last to say a word against that!"

The Squire smiled, for he understood the meaning of that cryptic remark. Whatever Philip Hart-Brown was in his office, he was a dreadful old rip outside it—capable of the meanest amours and reading the whole story of life's romance in the eyes of nursemaids and even ladies of humbler occupation. Nevertheless, nobody carried a bigger prayer-book to St. Martin's church, nor listened to George Dawson with a more becoming air of piety. Conformist or Nonconformist, it made little difference to him—for somebody must save him from those sins of which he was but too conscious.

The train came in from the north to put an end to this mutual admission of amours and a porter bustled the travellers into a first-class compartment and called for his mate with the "footwarmers" to come to his assistance.

The carriage was miserably lighted and cold as with a chill of vaults . . . but the water in the great iron cases which were now pushed along the floor had been boiling a

few minutes previously and some ooze of warmth soon mollified the discomforts of the compartment.

Both men were named for experienced travellers, though neither had been farther from England than the "gay" city of Paris, and each thought America to be largely peopled by cowboys and grizzly bears. So they wrapped themselves in heavy rugs and presently Hart-Brown produced a candle lamp which he affixed to the window by his side that he might glance at some of the many papers in the shiny black bag he had carried so carefully to the train.

"You'll sleep as usual, I suppose," he said to Blake—"I can't, more's the pity—I've got this poisoning case on at Rugby and must know a good deal more about it before I see Hawkins in the morning. On the top of that, Elgin wants me in this damned American business—we shall have trouble with that country if they go on stopping our ships and searching 'em. Liverpool's red hot about it and even Gladstone's waking up. By God, John, that man's done us some mischief with his talk of Davis making a navy and a nation. Was there ever a sublimer humbug, and our John has been telling him the truth for a year or more now. Slavery or no slavery. That's the issue as between the North and the South . . . and John Bright has never ceased for a day to tell 'em so."

The Squire disliked politics and never talked them if he could help it.

Foxes, hounds, bulls and women were the subjects which moved him to such rhetoric as he could muster. A son of Birmingham because he was also a son of Warwickshire, he felt a certain admiration for John Bright whose sentimental orations so moved that manufacturing city . . . but Palmerston really was his man: "And by God, sir," he would declare, "let old Pam speak and the world still trembles."

The lawyer was too shrewd a man of business to contradict so good a client, though he knew quite well that the

Squire's ignorance of America was abysmal, as was that of so many countrymen in the second year of the terrible War.

John Blake hunted foxes, drank port wine, kept his rents in a bag underneath his bed and slept through a long sermon on Sundays. He had a volume of Shakespeare in his house, which with Foxe's "Book of Martyrs" and a few tales about fox hunters were his "library"—though he rarely read a line of anything but the *Post*, and that only for news of the births, marriages and deaths. Little wonder that Forster's attempt to educate the children of the poor excited his contempt. The man would ruin the nation with his talk of reading, writing and arithmetic. And John Blake was not ashamed to say so whenever the question was raised.

In all this the lawyer humoured him, remembering his fine port wine and the fat fees he, Philip, charged for this mortgage or that upon the Squire's rapidly vanishing property. A prodigal truly and one supremely ignorant of the world and its way. Well, well, such men were a blessing to somebody . . . and why not to him, Philip Hart-Brown, solicitor and commissioner of oaths.

"You're all wrong about America, John, but I'm not going to argue with you," he said now. "This Abraham Lincoln is as great a man as the world has produced for many a long year; the States haven't known a greater since George Washington. We must avoid quarrelling with 'em—we in Birmingham at any rate; for we've trade to do afterwards and it mustn't go elsewhere. So we ought to keep our ships at home and not go meddling. Let's think of something else as a couple of men should, who are going to London, perhaps to meet the ladies. Eh, my boy, you'll find time to see Bella at the Alhambra, of course—and, who knows, I may find a petticoat somewhere, though known everywhere as a man of virtue and probity. That's what the Vicar of St. Martin's called me at the Easter meeting. 'Our beloved friend, Philip Hart-Brown, whose virtues shine like diamonds and whose

faith recalls the zeal of the early Christians.' He said that—I'm damned if he didn't; and of course I gave him twenty pounds. . . . I couldn't do less."

He laughed loudly at the reminiscence; but the train was now moving and as it entered the tunnel, he settled himself in his corner and began to unfold the briefs he had prepared for the eminent counsel in London whom he was about to visit. John Blake, for his part, was very glad to be left to a quiet doze—or, failing that, to those rumours of the dead past which had assailed him so unceasingly since he had left the Grange.

Eighteen years ago this month he had carried Lucy Waters, the Lord of Mount Ferrers' daughter, from the porch of Wichfield Cathedral to a mail-phaeton that was waiting for him by the market-place, and had driven her headlong to Birmingham with a special licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury in his pocket and a priest waiting at the journey's end to marry him.

The daughter of an Irishwoman and of a soldier whose father had fought at Waterloo and great-grandfather at Blenheim—she was Irish in all things but her chastity; and of that her biographer has found little to chronicle. But she rode like a woman of the circus and her sister, no less clever upon a horse, was already the Countess of Wichfield and the mother of twin babes.

John Blake, whose grandfather had been a yeoman and whose father was a brassfounder, cared little about titles and less about "proud and haughty" nobles; but a good horsewoman was irresistible; and from the day he first saw her at the covert side, he swore he would marry her.

She was new to the county then; a red-haired beauty with a skin of satin and of ivory and blue eyes which claimed innocence but not conviction.

Men said that her education had been finished in Paris, that she had been a favourite at the Court of the third

Napoleon, and that certain young officers of dragoons had helped her to a more intimate knowledge of their charming language. The Empress, however, seems ultimately to have been shocked by her premature freedom and to have recommended her uncle, the Ambassador, to send her back to England, there to study the habits of the birds and their modesty.

Less kind people hinted at an absolute scandal . . . and at a seclusion of many months, terminating happily without enduring consequences—but this was merely rumour, of which the truth was known only to Lucy Waters herself and to her old aunt, Gwendoline . . . a very coquette even in her sixtieth year, and one who sympathized with all maidens forlorn. With this genial old evildoer, Lucy lived for two years. Then she came to visit her sister at Wichfield Castle . . . and so she met John Blake.

She was not without lovers at that time; she never was; but her wanderings and her seclusion had baffled some by the way, and only one man had proposed to her since she came into Warwickshire. To be married in three months' time, the gossip said; and the man himself the most pompous ass in the county, though he was its member and owned Moseley Hall and a gallery of pictures by artists whose names no honest man could spell. Lucy accepted him *faute de mieux*. She was a woman who could not live without a man.

Some of this gossip came to the Squire's ears at the covert side of Long Moor, when in the first week of October, his cob carried him eight miles to the hunt and many friends awaited him when he got there. Possessing a quick eye for a woman, he perceived Lucy Waters immediately and hastened to ask his neighbour about her.

"A fine wench," he said; and the other fox-hunter agreed.

"Would she be of these parts?"

"Why, Squire, don't you know . . . she is the Countess's

sister, staying there this two months now and already engaged to Harold Nicholson. Give her joy of that ass. He'd drive any woman to the churchyard if she lived long enough with him . . . and look at her, all life and devil . . . and a beauty on a horse. You'll admit that, I know—a beauty on a horse, I say, and rides like a jockey!"

John Blake did admit it. The surest appeal a woman could make to him was that she suggested those human frailties to which he had always a mind himself . . . and it was sufficient to hint that her virtue might not be adamant to secure his interest immediately.

Lucy Waters—Lucy Waters—why, of course, he had heard about her. Been in Paris and sent home for a naughty little lady. Not in favour with the Empress Eugénie—a bit of an embarrassment to her sister, who was as chaste as an archbishop, if archbishops were all that was said about them. Odd that they should want to marry such a girl to a man like Nicholson, who gave five hundred a year to the missionaries and voted in Parliament for the retention of child labour in the factories. An ill-assorted pair. The girl must be hard put to it for any distraction if she really were ready to marry a man like that.

"Is she staying long among us?" Blake now asked.

The fox-hunter said that she was to be married at Wichfield Cathedral in a month's time and that her father, Lord Mount Ferrers, was to come over from Ireland for the ceremony . . . "and we'll be there at the grand ball they're giving, I suppose, and dancing the old devil to bed just as though he were a pretty cavalier and she a simple maiden. Damn it, Blake, life's full of funny things, and women, surely, the funniest of them all."

Hounds moved off while he was speaking and shortly afterwards they heard the "gone away" from the far side of the wood and saw that they were to be left, as even the cleverest fellows in any hunt may be. This fox, however,

went to earth after a fast gallop of five minutes or so, and when next they found, Blake was well away enough and Lucy Waters beside him. How well she was going, he thought. How sure was her judgment of line and the likely places. His big bay horse could have out-galloped her grey quickly enough: but he felt in no mood to hurry. It was something to see her fencing. And once they took a formidable double side by side; and when they were over, she gave him one of her radiant smiles . . . and then looked at him again. In her mind was the thought—"What a handsome man, why have I not seen him before!" On his part, he was already saying: "What a mouth to kiss!"

These ocular coquettings did not make for hard riding: but it was a day of poor scent and broken hunting and at Abbotts' Brook they lost the fox and hounds went home.

So the Squire and Lucy Waters had a five miles' amble together and the pair of them talked as though they had known each other all their lives. "Staying with her sister at the Castle, wasn't she?"

"Yes, for her sins."

What had she done to deserve it? Good works were too much for her. She didn't really mind whether the poor black men did, or did not, eat missionaries. It was a curious taste if they did—and she was sorry, because Helen, her sister, was so fond of them. Leonard, her brother-in-law, had taken a lesson from Leopold of Belgium and did "bead work" —most exciting but a little monotonous. There had been an awful row in the house when she was found with the latest book of that mad young Frenchman, Théophile Gautier. Had the Squire read it? "Mademoiselle de Maupin" . . . very naughty but surely amusing! She would lend it to him if he liked: but, of course, nobody must know. The poor man did not know what to say to that. If it had been a translation now!

Happily he managed to turn the conversation and to talk of horses.

"A good grey you're on, but a little big for you," he criticized . . . "and clumsy. He put the Earl into the Melton Marsh a fortnight ago . . . and it takes a bad horse to do that. Now, I've got a little chestnut mare that jumps like a monkey and is as clever. She'd carry you over anything and go with your pretty hair. Drive over and see her at Quainton Grange one day: and if you like her, damn it, I'll give her to you with pleasure."

The outburst of generosity—such an outburst as often overtook John Blake when women were the recipients—took away both his breath and hers. She was tempted to laugh at the swiftness of her conquest but did not. That it should have happened after an acquaintanceship of two hours did not altogether surprise her. Men had proposed to her in Ireland after the second quadrille, while an elderly gentleman in the train from Liverpool had told her, at the end of five minutes' conversation, that he was a widower with seven children and sorely in need of a second wife.

Here the story was different, for she had heard much of John Blake, of his horsemanship, his home . . . and above all, of his frailties with women. The more emotional side of her was stirred by these memories. A man of fine presence —he surely would be a great lover.

Three days later she drove over to Quainton Grange and he showed her the chestnut mare, his stables and his greenhouses and the portrait of his grandmother painted by Sir Thomas Raeburn. The house was low and gabled and very homelike. The gardens should be aglow in the summer with true Warwickshire roses, she thought, while the lawns and the great trees were very beautiful. And the man himself won a woman's confidence by his candour and his very bonhomie.

"I'm no saint," he said in one unguarded outburst,

"many a pretty wench has got into the wrong bedroom here and nobody told the parson about it. I'm just a plain man, and my father was a brassfounder . . . couldn't read or write hardly, and yet most of the pictures and bronzes in this house were bought by him. How do ye account of that now? Not pretty faces . . . these saints and virgins are not much to talk about when you begin to think of the ladies . . . and, damme, but they look a sorrowful lot in their pictures. Maybe we are descended from some of the old rips they talked about when George was king. But we're a bad lot, Miss Waters, a bad lot . . . and don't you listen to anybody who tells you different."

Lucy Waters laughed with that little silvery laugh which denoted her excitement when any question of feminine virtue arose.

Her vivid imagination recreated the amorous scenes which this old house had known and in which this lusty Squire must have played a voluptuous part. Nevertheless, the saints and sages of the pictures made a sure appeal to her sense of art: and she could reflect sadly that her own father, the Lord of Mount Ferrers, had long since parted with his Rubens and his Rembrandts and that little but poor copies now hung upon the ancestral walls. Unquestionably, she would sooner have talked of love than of pictures and in that the Squire did not disappoint her. "Damn all obstacles" was his motto, when an assault upon women was contemplated. "Put the horse at the fence whatever it is," he would say; "and if he refuses, remember your spurs."

He was all ears, then, when Lucy ventured to suggest that some of the holy men in the pictures had been lovers themselves and that the devil had troubled certain of the angelic ladies.

"How little anybody knows of anybody else's heart or thoughts," she reflected; "when I see nuns at their prayers in Ireland, I often wonder if the dear things are not fighting

some vision of a *beau sabreur* on horseback—or thinking of a fairy prince in silver raiment. Every moment we stand before our friends with some secret which the mind has to put away in its dark cupboards. You—at this very minute—are you thinking only of that picture there—or does it suggest something else altogether to you?"

The Squire swung round on his heel and looked her full in the face.

"You're right: it suggests you," he said. "Why, I can't tell you, but something in the eyes. How that lady remained a saint with eyes like that, the Lord only knows."

"Ho, ho, what a reflection on my sanctity. Don't you know I am to marry Harold Nicholson in a few weeks time."

"I know nothing of the kind, and as far as I am concerned Harold Nicholson can go to the devil. You're going to marry me, Lucy Waters; and that's the beginning and the end of it."

Lucy, clever as she was with men, gasped a little for breath, so swift was the onslaught . . . but she said neither "yes" nor "no," merely leading him by the hand into the orangery; while she observed that those old masters were really too exciting and she preferred the greenery of the restful leaves.

"We shall meet at Holman's Cross to-morrow," she went on, when she had turned that thorny subject; "you hunt there, of course."

"Lucy Waters—I do not hunt there. I am, on the contrary, going to London to see my friend, the Archbishop of Canterbury."

"Seriously, do you hope that he will convert you—close all those rooms which you have shown me?"

"They will all be closed . . . no doubt of that. I shall give the keys to you." She laughed again, still a little hysterical and excited.

"You are an amazing man and I am quite wrong to be

alone with you in this house. What would the saintly Helen, my sister, say if she heard you?"

"Oh, damn suppositions," he rejoined . . . and then a servant told him that her groom and her horse were at the door.

Just five days after this strange encounter, Harold Nicholson went to do a little shopping in Wichfield while his fiancée said she would attend evensong in the cathedral.

The accomplished choir was singing a Magnificat by Wesley as she passed through the building and she always remembered the solemn gloom of that divine fane; the candles which shed their pale aureoles as halos about the heads of imagined saints; the sweetness of the boys' voices and the mellow diapasons of the ancient organ.

Often, in after years, she reminded John Blake of the emotions she had suffered in these eventful moments and of the absolute terror which affected her for an instant when the choir was singing: "And Holy is His Name." Was it a coincidence of rebuke or encouragement? She came in after years to believe that she had been divinely guided . . . for she was ever the child of superstition and of dreams . . . and with these words still ringing in her ears, she stumbled into John Blake's arms and was almost lifted by him into his phaeton.

"Ten o'clock to-morrow at St. Philip's Church," he said, as he gave the horses their heads and the iron tyres rang upon the cobble stones of the market-place.

It was at the very moment that Harold Nicholson came out of the jeweller's shop with a diamond and turquoise bracelet in his hand. Three days afterwards he returned it to the jeweller.

CHAPTER III

THE MISSES FAWKS EXPRESS THEIR REGRET

THE train arrived at Euston a little after nine o'clock, delayed by the heavy fog which lay over Chalk Farm and the fields about St. Pancras.

It was clearer about the station; and four-wheeled cabs with ancient drivers, who mostly coughed with great vigour to impress upon their fares the nature of their daring, emerged from the gloom as the train drew up and offered their services for a premium. Into one of these, John Blake and Hart-Brown pitched their carpet bags and set out at an amble for Bond's Hotel. This London gave them a damp welcome; but there were light and life at the heart of it for him who knew where to seek them.

"Going on to the Alhambra, I suppose," said Philip, as the cab rolled upon the stones of the Euston Road before passing the waste land at the top of Great Portland Street—he was hardly curious for he thought that John could have no other destination.

The Squire, however, seemed a little dubious. This night, seventeen years ago, Lucy had lain huddled in a bed at the Hen and Chickens Hotel at Birmingham: waiting for him to take her in his arms. He still could remember it, while they drove through the ill-lit streets of London to that highly respectable hotel in Albemarle Street which all "country gentlemen" frequented.

"Whatever I do, I'll get some supper first," he said emphatically; "what with one thing and another, I've had no more than would feed a sparrow since eight o'clock this

morning—and that's no good to any man. You'll be going to Evans' I suppose for the kidneys—well, you're tough enough, Philip, to stand most things; why, damn it, you once ate a whole goose, they tell me, and none the worse for it."

Philip laughed but did not admit either the goose or the supper-rooms. He had written to a tousled-haired beauty in a Regent Street shoe-shop three days previously and looked to receive some encouraging reply when he reached the hotel . . . and sure enough the clerk there slipped a little note into his hand directly he arrived and his heart beat quicker when he read it. The misty night, he reflected, would hide his goings and his comings . . . and who could blow out a candle more dexterously than he?

John Blake, for his part, ate the enormous steak he had promised himself and drank the best part of a bottle of Burgundy to wash it down. Then he smoked a cigar in the little smoking-room to which men of such evil tastes were condemned.

Already he had made up his mind that he would not go to the Alhambra to see Bella. He could not with all these memories of his dead wife hanging about his soul like shrouds. No, no, that sort of thing was not for to-night—and, moreover, there was such a day before him to-morrow. He dreaded the thought of it.

He must see Fordacre, of course. He would have to go there if merely to establish his belief in Sophie's innocence.

Nobody else would stand up for that poor child and he must do so. Philip would help him, of course, and Philip was the devil of a man in a police-court and knew how to draw a brief for a criminal court as well as any lawyer in England. With his help he would see the affair through, although the newspapers were making it hard enough, God knew.

What sensational gutter stuff the evening journals were selling that very night! And what business was it of theirs, all said and done.

These distracting thoughts forbade sleep and he lay awake quite half the night listening to the clatter of the horses' hoofs and the rattle of the iron tyres on the macadam below his windows. Philip was not about when he came down to breakfast next morning . . . and his old friend John, the waiter, was not quite sure whether Mr. Hart-Brown had, or had not, returned on the previous evening. A gossip, this good fellow, with his dirty napkin on his sleeve and finger-nails that knew little of any soap.

London had added some attractions since the Squire was there, he observed.

"These new hansom cabs, sir—wonderful they are and quite safe, I believe. You should have a ride in one before you leave us. And, then, there's this new railway under the ground—runs from Paddington to the City, I'm told, though I can't say I've had the pleasure of going inside of it. Very smoky, I should think, sir, very smoky indeed."

John Blake said that it must be so; but anything drawn by a horse intrigued him: and it was in one of the new hansom cabs that he set off finally to interview the Misses Fawks, whose elegant finishing school for the daughters of the "nobility and gentry" lay a stone's throw from Belgrave Square.

It was comparatively a new neighbourhood then, its squares and stately houses built on what were known as the "five fields"—the old short cut to the village of Kensington, and one gratifying to the hearts of the many footpads who frequented it.

Not yet had many of the aristocracy settled in the fine mansions of Belgravia; and many ladies' schools were installed in the neighbourhood, offering French, German and music to "desirable" pupils for sums which were astonishing at such a day.

In this employment were Miss Angelina and Miss Mariana Fawks engaged when John Blake called upon them

at their request. They had sent for him to tell him that his daughter, Lucy, was no longer a desirable pupil.

They were prim bodies, both dressed in black moiré antique silk and each wearing a long gold chain about her neck to secure the little gold watch which helped to account for every minute of a busy day.

A stranger might have taken them for twins; but really time had dealt so hardly with their faces that, whether Miss Angelina were older than Miss Mariana or Miss Mariana than Miss Angelina mattered very little to anybody, their pupils last of all.

Now they sat, prim and upright, upon two gold-backed chairs: and thus enthroned, they began to tell the Squire why they had sent for him.

"We are, indeed, grieved that such a thing should have happened to your daughter, Mr. Blake, but the ways of the Almighty are inscrutable and we must bow our heads to them."

"And remember," added Miss Mariana, who was exceedingly Low Church and sat under the Reverend Bartholomew Necker at the Grosvenor chapel—"remember that there is forgiveness and salvation for us all if we do but seek it."

The Squire was very much astonished. He looked from one old lady to the other and back again, but could glean nothing from these sphinx-like countenances.

"But my good women," he ejaculated at length, "what in God's name are you talking about? You don't say my daughter Lucy has committed a murder, do you? You're not trying to drag her into this damnable affair—don't tell me that, ladies, or I shall be very angry indeed."

Miss Mariana thought that he should not have used the word "damnable" and was convinced that, even in the circumstances, the Reverend Bartholomew would not have let it fall from his saintly lips. Miss Angelina, however, liked

"a man," and she could quite believe that the case was "damnable," though she would have used some other word herself.

"Of course," she said; "we do not allow any newspapers in this house, for that would offend the well-born parents who entrust us with their children. But we have heard the sad news from many lips and our distress has been beyond all words. . . . Think of it, Mr. Blake, a child of five murdered in cold blood. Now if he had been a little older——"

"You think it wouldn't have mattered!" cried John Blake, rapidly working himself into a passion, as was his wont when anybody attempted to contradict him. Happily, the door was opened at the moment and who should walk in but that ascetic and meagre saint, the Reverend Bartholomew Necker himself, whose face ever wore the celestial smile he hoped to carry from earth to heaven, and whose goloshes were in the hat-rack of the hall below.

"Good morning, Miss Angelina; good morning, Miss Mariana. You are both very well, I hope—and the dear girls. This would be Mr. John Blake, I think, pleased to meet you, sir, though the circumstances are unhappy. Yet those whom He loveth, He afflicteth—and, yes, Madeira please, but I will take no cake."

A pretty maidservant, who gave the young minister a swift but not altogether pious glance when their eyes met, had entered with decanters upon a tray and a sponge cake to keep them company.

One of the wines was Madeira—the other port, but the essentially poisonous nature of both was well known to Squire Blake and he passed them with a shudder. The clergyman, on the contrary, sipped his glass discreetly, though he refused the sponge cake which should have accompanied the Madeira wine.

"Let me see. . . . I was saying . . . um, ah, yes, a

GIRLS COLLE

very sad case, sir, and you are very wise to take your daughter into the country for a little while until all this unpleasant scandal is forgotten. Truly, are the sins of the fathers visited on the children to the third and fourth generation."

"By a jealous God—a jealous God," repeated Miss Mariana almost hysterically.

The Squire leaned back in his chair and looked at them as one to whom words did not come readily.

"Am I to understand, Mr. What-do-you-call-yourself, that you are mixing up my daughter's name with this terrible affair at Kensington? Is that in your mind?"

The Reverend Bartholomew responded with one of those little cynical smiles which he knew how to command when his spiritual authority seemed to be questioned.

"The world is very cruel," he said . . . "as Holy Scripture tells us, the heart of man is wholly vile and full of evil withal. The ladies, I fear, are not often kinder" . . . and he looked at Miss Angelina and Miss Mariana, as who should say—"I must tell him but this is not for you."

"What the devil has the heart of man to do with me, sir? You are talking of my daughter, Lucy. What have you to tell me about her——?"

"I have to tell you this, sir, that she has given these two dear ladies much pain for many months now . . . ever since Mademoiselle de Haute-Croix came to us from the Château of Aisy-le-Rideau, your daughter has been a source of affliction in this house. Pain has visited Miss Angelina, sorrow has come to Miss Mariana. That vice should have sought its home in one so young. . . ."

"Vice, sir, vice," roared the Squire. "What are you telling me then? Do you name my daughter when you speak?"

The parson was quite unabashed. Neither the spasmodic gasps of Miss Angelina nor the pious sobbing of Miss Mariana deterred him his holy purpose.

"There are degrees, sir, degrees . . . what may be eccentricity in a woman of thirty may be most vicious in a child of sixteen. But one week ago, a copy of that lewd novel 'Tom Jones' was found in your daughter's bedroom. Who put it there? Who there read it? Is it a book a servant-girl, a manservant would enjoy? I say, no, sir. It was your daughter's choice, sir. Deliberately, she has chosen to read of a harlot and a profligate. What then, shall I call her conduct? And now there is murder in the family. . . murder, for a coroner's jury has said so. Shall I, upon that, make any apology for my words?"

He waited exultingly for his answer: but it was not such as he had expected. Slowly and determinedly the Squire arose from his chair and advanced towards the astonished cleric. Then he boxed him heavily on both his ears, and turning with a lion's roar upon the women, he demanded his daughter and his bill.

"My daughter, Madame . . . my daughter and my bill. By God in Heaven, I seem to have sent her to a queer house. Nobility and gentry! why, damme, there are more nobility and gentry in Newgate jail. I say, you will send for her, Madame, send for her immediately. Do you hear me, women? . . . then go and do what I tell you before I lose my temper and forget myself. . . ."

A passionate man . . . but a just cause. The wretched women shrank before his warning . . . the miserable parson cowed like a beaten dog. Soon there was rushing to and fro in the rooms above, the giggling of excited girls, the bumping of a wooden box upon uncarpeted stairs. And through it all the clergyman sat meek and stricken, while Squire Blake strode to and fro in the big room, lashing his leg with his cane as though a good horse were beneath him and one of Warwickshire's stiffest fences his immediate objective.

And so, at last, came his daughter Lucy to his arms—a ravishing picture even in her plain black dress and her prim

white collar; the rich brown hair combed back from her white forehead and the truly Irish eyes, so eloquent and so mischievous.

"You darling Papa to come," she cried.

They were away to Albemarle Street in a four-wheeled cab ten minutes later . . . and the bill at Belgrave House was paid that very afternoon.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF THE TRAGEDY

Lucy knew nothing of what had happened in Kensington and the Squire hoped very much that she never would.

Not for a moment could he bring himself to believe that his niece Sophie (who reminded him sometimes of his own dead wife) had part or lot in a tragedy so revolting . . . yet he could understand the social intolerance of the two old women in Belgravia though not the ranting of their parson. The child had been killed by some maid-servant girl, if killed at all, he argued. And presently the police would discover the fact and all this disgraceful rumour be estimated at its true worth.

This was in his mind when he took Lucy back to Albemarle Street and listened to her light talk of what had happened at the school and just what the old ladies had been saying to her.

To their credit, he put the fact that Sophie's name had not been mentioned. "Tom Jones," unfortunately, had not enjoyed the same privacy . . . and the Squire could have roared with laughter when Lucy described her adventures with that great book and the means whereby it had come into her possession.

"You know, dear Papa," she said; "I never bought the thing—how could I, for we never go near any shops and you don't buy books like that in church, do you? Adeline thinks that William, the page-boy, got it from his father's book-shop somewhere in the Strand and lent it to some of the

elder girls to get them into a row. Adeline herself, did read it and tried to get me to translate some of it into French for her—she's Adeline de Haute-Croix, you know, and her Papa's a great French Count, who's a friend of the Emperor Napoleon. Well, I couldn't do that, for it's one of the silliest books I ever read, all about a great tomboy named Tom Jones and a silly village girl he goes courting—that's as far as I got in it and then Miss Angelina found it and showed it to the clergyman, who took it away because he said it wasn't fit for us to have in the house. Now, wasn't it silly to make all that fuss about nothing at all—but, dearest Papa, if you don't mind, I don't, for now we shall go back home just when the hunting is beginning and I shall ride Dicky, shan't I . . . and you'll be glad to have me with you, won't you . . . and oh, it will be so lovely after that awful house and those two dreadful old cats, who're enough to drive a saint mad as everybody in the place says. . . ."

The Squire gave her a hug for the words and would, indeed, have been pleased to welcome her home but for this dread affair and its possible sequence.

As it was, he had to tell her that of course she should ride Dicky and equally, of course, that he would be delighted to have her home again.

"And won't John be jealous," she said, speaking of her young brother, then at Malvern school.

The Squire agreed that he would be—and, then, as they had promised to wait for Hart-Brown to dine with them at three o'clock—the Squire's invariable hour for the chief meal of the day—he took Lucy out for a walk in Piccadilly and Bond Street—those great thoroughfares of "fashion and deportment" as the guide-books of that day described them; and he showed her the "howling swells" in all their finery and the great barouches of the "duchesses" with footmen in dazzling liveries hanging to straps behind the

gorgeous carriages—young men in cabriolets and phaetons . . . and people so many and shops so rich that her little head was quite turned by the spectacle and she began already to dream of a fairy prince and the slipper of glass at the silver ball.

The Squire was a jovial authority of London—though he forbore to point out the Alhambra to Lucy or to mention a certain "Bella," who got a more or less honest livelihood by dancing on her toes at various music halls and had an inordinate appetite for stout and oysters.

Proudly he indicated to Lucy the scene of his shopping exploits with her dead mother—the house where he bought her the famous emeralds, the furrier who had supplied her sables, and the Parisian costumier who had contributed so much to a good woman's happiness.

At all these establishments Lucy stared with wonder and delight; and when in Bond Street, dear Papa actually bought her a little diamond brooch and a coat of real sealskin, she believed truly that this was the golden city of her dreams and that none other could be like it.

This brooch she was wearing when they returned to the hotel, where they found Hart-Brown, much pleased by his interview with that great barrister Henry Hawkins; and ready, as he said, for any fun with them since he had not to return to Birmingham until the following morning.

"I'll take the child out while you go to Kensington," he declared playfully to the Squire while they washed their hands before dinner. "A regular beauty she's grown, my boy, with all her mother's vivacity in those naughty eyes of hers. You'll have to keep an eye on the men, Blake, in a year or two. I'm damned if I wouldn't propose to her myself if I were ten years younger. A regular bewitching little fairy . . . that's what she is and she knows it."

The latter observation was ignored by the Squire—as fathers will ignore the truth about their children when entirely good-natured friends express it.

Yet, to a stranger it might have seemed that Lucy had something more than a child's expression in her eyes, when she let Philip kiss her, and that, more than once during the heavy dinner, she exchanged with him a glance that was not infantile. His proposition, that they should go that night to hear the Moore and Burgess American Minstrels at the St. James's Hall pleased her very much; and when the Squire declared that he could not tolerate that kind of thing, but that Philip might take her, she appeared to be by no means displeased.

"I expect we shall come back to find you asleep, dearest Papa," she observed innocently enough. The Squire said, "Perhaps you will," but he refused to catch Philip's eye when he said it. Was the hypocrite thinking still of the Alhambra and a certain "Bella"? Who shall read aright a riddle of that kind?

If such were his thoughts, however, he did not carry them with him on that memorable journey to Kensington, when he called upon his brother-in-law and heard for the first time the true story of the tragedy and understood its implications.

Greville Fordacre was then a man of fifty—the second son of Lord Fordacre of Uckfield and for some little while an ornament of the Grenadier Guards.

He had married Sophie Blake when he was twenty-three years of age . . . and one daughter, Sophie, was the fruit of that unhappy amour.

A martinet and bully, he had inflicted some ten years of torture upon a highly sensitive woman and then had buried her.

His second wife was an Italian lady, happily also of a passionate nature and a first-rate ability to take care of herself.

She threw a valuable Chinese vase at her husband's head within three months of their marriage—and a roasted leg of mutton before the lively year was out.

Greville swiftly gave up this contest, and like bullies will, he succumbed. Scenes before servants were intolerable to him when others made them and Bianca Costella —as his bride had been named—could make and sustain a scene with any woman alive. So, a truce was called and children were born, the little Greville first of all and, afterwards, the baby Bianca. It was the child Greville who had died so mysteriously in Kensington—the child about whom John Blake had come to the house to speak.

Greville Fordacre received him in the little study on the ground floor.

Kensington was then in part a country suburb, and while some of its trees and gardens were beautiful, a great deal of it was given up to nurseries which were far from an ornament to a pleasant landscape.

Greville's house stood on the slopes of Campden Hill and overlooked the beautiful grounds of Holland House where old Henry Fox had given his great parties and Charles James had planned his treacheries to the various governments of his day.

In this garden, the tragedy had befallen; and, naturally, Fordacre began to speak of it at once—a big, red-faced man with a heavy white moustache and eyes that were dull and lifeless. All the old spirit had gone out of him—and to give him his due, the loss of his little son had afflicted him terribly.

"Glad you've come, John," he said quietly, when they had shaken hands, "of course, you've read what the coroner had to say—well, he's all wrong about the servant Harriet —she's as innocent as I am. Just come into the garden and see where it happened—the poor little man. By God, it's difficult to speak of it—five years old . . . and murdered. I don't know sometimes whether I'm alive or dead and I don't much care. My son—my boy——"

He almost broke down upon the words—but Blake laid a kindly hand upon his arm.

"Come, come," he said with unusual gentleness, "this calls for all the courage a man has got, Greville. We all feel the same way about it and our hearts are heavy. Good God, I'd strangle the murderer myself if I could lay my hands upon him—yet I'm hoping after all it was an accident —surely, you think there's some chance of that?"

"Frankly, I don't. It was three in the afternoon and he was playing in the summer-house . . . but come and see for yourself and then tell me what kind of an accident it could have been."

He led the way through a wide french window on to a secluded lawn.

Great elms hid all trace of Kensington village from view, though upon the eastern side, London was to be seen—the towers of Westminster Abbey and in the distance the dome of St. Paul's and the steeples of the city churches.

A warm sunshine gave a passing sheen to the dying leaves of a great copper-beech tree and played with a harmony of silver upon the waters of a little pool, wherein a fountain stood with the figure of a siren crowning it gracefully. But the fountain was still that day and sorrow shimmered amidst the sickly branches about it.

Upon the edge of this pretty pool, the summer-house stood.

A wooden arbour painted green, it had the customary semicircle of boards for a seat, and stout rafters above to support a quite substantial roof. In the centre was a table upon which still stood (or lay) the wooden soldiers with which the dead child had played. The glass of a broken tumbler, which had contained milk, glistening in fragments upon the floor when the sunlight touched it.

"It happened here," began Fordacre, standing before the door of the arbour; he spoke very slowly as though every word cost him pain . . . "the rope which strangled the child was one they had used in the summer to hang lanterns

in the place—some fool called it a skipping-rope at the inquest, but of course, it wasn't. It was thrown over that beam and the ends knotted about his neck. Ask yourself if he could have done it himself. How could he have reached the roof even if he stood on the table? Somebody must have done it for him . . . and there were two women in the garden: your niece Sophie and the maid Harriet. Why should the maid have done it? She was devoted to the child. And Sophie—good God, it's inconceivable that it should have been her. But I'll find out the truth, John, if it costs me a thousand pounds. There shall be another rope for somebody, as heaven is my witness."

He spoke with just anger and bitterness, and it was not lost upon Blake that he had used the words, "your niece" and not "my daughter" as he should have done.

The fact provoked displeasure; but the circumstances forbade its expression. To his own surprise, the Squire, usually so passionate, found himself singularly calm and collected. Already, he was arguing out the case in his own mind. Sophie, it was true, had often betrayed to him her jealousy of the children who came after. Her temperament was as Irish as her maternal grandmother's; and uncontrollable fits of passion were characteristic of her youth. But between mere childish jealousy and murder, surely there was a great gulf fixed! Moreover, the facts were all that mattered in this dreadful case . . . and how did the facts accuse her?

"You say that the two girls were in the garden when it happened. Did it come out at the inquest just where they were?"

"Harriet says she was back in the shrubbery looking for a ball the poor little man had lost. Sophie pretends that she had gone in for a minute to get the boat Greville used to play with in the pool. She came out of the house about five minutes later and thought that the boy was

swinging on the rope just for the fun of the thing. Her idea, according to the tale she tells, was that Harriet had thrown the cord over the beam and must be inside the arbour with Greville. When she did go to him eventually, he was beyond all hope. That's the story, John . . . now, I repeat, tell me what kind of an accident you think it could have been!"

Blake shook his head as a man who could read the heart of a mystery but will not.

"One of them put the rope over the bar, that's certain," he admitted presently and then correcting himself—"unless of course there was something here on which the poor boy could have stood. Have you thought of that, Greville?"

"There was nothing of the kind, John. One of the jurymen thought that the lad might have taken a lucky shot with the cord and caught the end of it—but who could have put the idea of hanging into his head? You don't suppose, that a child who hardly knew his letters went into my library and reached down the 'Newgate Calendar' or 'Paul Jones, the Pirate,' or that kind of book, do you? I've plenty of 'em on the shelves there for I always found them damned good reading. But little Greville, what did he know of ropes and hangings and all that? Believe me, somebody else put that rope up there and one of the two women tied the knot. God in Heaven, I wish I knew."

He turned from the scene as though weary of it and Blake followed him slowly into the house.

"Hart-Brown's in town," he said as he went; "I wonder if you'd like him to drive round and see you. Splendid fellow, Hart-Brown. He's defending that man at Rugby charged with poisoning his wife, and as Hawkins is briefed, they'll get him off. I should like him to question that maid again. Nobody knows better than you, Greville, that any thought of Sophie in the matter is ridiculous. I'd

as soon think my own sister had come back from the grave and done it. . . ."

Greville ignored the latter part of his statement.

"Question whom you like," he rejoined shortly. "Hart-Brown's clever enough and I'll see him if you wish. But, John—suppose we don't want to know the truth. Suppose we must hush it up at all costs. . . ."

"I'll believe that when Hart-Brown says so. He was going to Birmingham in the morning but I'll keep him back if I can . . . when did Sophie leave you, by the way?"

"Immediately after the inquest—she's with you, of course."

"Indeed, she is not. Gone to her cousin at Moseley, I expect. Hart-Brown shall see her with me, directly we get back."

"Then I hope she'll tell you the truth, whatever it is."

"She's not her mother's child if she doesn't. In your place, Greville, I'd be ashamed of my thoughts—but that's your business. I'm off now or I'll not catch Philip. Lucy's with me, as you may expect. The old women at the school asked me to take her away. Did you ever hear such damned impudence in your life?"

Greville shrugged his shoulders.

"If you pay for a child to learn cant, what can you expect? It's their gospel. Of course, the whole town is talking of the affair—and isn't the child better in her home where they won't talk. I shouldn't have left her there, if I'd been you, John, whatever the women wanted. Unto the third and fourth generation, you know!"

"Yes—and on the top of that, they preach Christ. I'm going to hell, I suppose, after the life I've led . . . but if that's the meaning of the Bible, I don't want their heaven at any price. But I don't believe it is . . . and as for Lucy, I'll take care of her though all the Archbishops in

the country come into Warwickshire to gossip about her. Think of it—a child to get the cold shoulder because her little cousin meets with an accident and nobody can say how it happened. Why, it's perfectly damnable, Greville."

"Much that happens in the world is, John. We can only make the best of it and take the bad with the good."

Blake saw that his mind still ran upon the possibility that Sophie was guilty; and that the second wife's insane jealousy of the first wife's child had driven him to that position. He would not argue the matter further . . . and after a few more words of generalities, he drove back to Albemarle Street to find that Lucy and Philip were still out together, though it had fallen quite dark and the wan gas lamps warred already with autumn's mists in the ill-lit streets. When the pair returned, they were as merry as children . . . and Lucy confessed that she had never enjoyed herself more.

"And do you know," she said radiantly; "Uncle Philip took me to Skeeter's in Bond Street and bought me a pair of turquoise ear-rings. Now, wasn't it kind of him?"

The Squire was not altogether pleased. Philip was not her "uncle" and jewellery did not seem quite a suitable present for a child of sixteen—coming from one who was no relation.

CHAPTER V

ARTHUR ST. JUST HEARS A CONFESSION

THE young woman, who had said that she might call again, came once more to the gate of Arthur St. Just's vicarage in the village of Quainton just after three o'clock of the day when John Blake was in London upon his momentous mission.

The weather had fallen cold, though fair and bracing; and the afternoon had found the lonely priest abroad in his garden, his cassock (so very Roman in the eyes of Mrs. Flack, the doctor's wife) gathered up about his waist and a substantial spade in his hand. He saw the girl at once, however, and loosening his girdle that his skirts might fall to the ground, he went to the gate to meet her, since hesitation was marked in her mood and seemed hardly divorced from fear.

"You want to see me, my child?"

"Oh, please, please," she exclaimed with an earnestness she made no attempt to conceal.

The Vicar led the way into the little church, and within its doors he asked her if she wished to come to confession. The question perplexed her and she answered it but vaguely.

"I have something I must, *must* tell you," she rejoined almost passionately. "Sarah Ockley, my old nurse down at the farm, says you are very kind and good and so I have come to you. It's about some great trouble I am in—there is nobody else I can speak to . . . that is, oh you would never tell anybody else, would you?"

"My holy calling would forbid that, my child. You shall tell me in confession and then your secret is for ever buried. I see you are some relative of Squire Blake. Is it possible that you are his niece, Sophie?"

"Yes, his niece Sophie. I came from London three days ago and tried to see you yesterday. But they said——"

"Yes, yes, I had a sick call near Harborne and was away all the afternoon. Now, come and sit here and we will ask our Lord Jesus to help us."

He led the way to a chair and a faldstool set by the wall, just behind the pulpit. The little church was very bare save for the beautiful altar with its painted reredos of the Crucifixion and the seven lamps which hung before it; but there was an atmosphere of peace and holiness within, as though the very saintliness of the priest who served it breathed upon the bare stones and gave them life. Sophie Fordacre was conscious of this directly she entered the building and she went trembling but unafraid to the faldstool and knelt as though this were the refuge she had been seeking.

She was in her twenty-first year then, a real "Irish beauty" as many called her; a child in face but possessing the arms and the figure of an older woman. The hair was a rich chestnut; her eyes of a blue that was as of some southern sea. But her chief glory was her skin, so gloriously pink and white that no artist could see her without desiring to paint her, and many already had done so, though their pictures had not always reached the academy.

If there were a defect in this otherwise arresting face, the lips would have been named to its detriment. They were thick, almost coarse, and the teeth they shielded had been neglected in an age which knew little of dentistry. Yet apart from this, she was undoubtedly a beautiful woman —and if the type generally suggested the lascivious and the sensual, the spirituality of the eyes somewhat atoned for

this assertion of a nature, inherited from generations of profligates and voluptuaries.

Such was Sophie Fordacre as she knelt before that ascetic priest, Arthur St. Just, whose name was to be heard so often in the "No Popery" brawls of the future and whose action upon this occasion brought such a storm of opprobrium upon him.

A frail, delicate shadow of a man he was, living wholly amid the saints and angels of a mediæval Christianity, but with a human sympathy and understanding of his fellow men and women that seemed to be wholly inspired. None left his confessional that was not comforted. The very poorest sat at his table and ate with him. And now he knew that a woman who had sinned knelt before him, and raising his hand, he blessed her.

"You have been to confession before, my child?"

"Never, Father . . . my stepmother goes but she is a Catholic."

"But now I hope you will come whenever the Lord Jesus puts it into your heart to do so. Say the General Confession after me, my child——"

"I confess to Almighty God . . ."

Sophie said it, her head bent, her heart beating wildly.

"I confess to Almighty God . . ."

"To the Blessed Virgin and to all the Saints . . ."

"To the Blessed Virgin and to all the Saints . . ."

"That I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word and deed, by my fault, by my most grievous fault."

She repeated it after him but did not smite her breast, being ignorant of the Catholic custom. But she was very humble when she said: "Therefore I beg the Blessed Virgin and all the Saints to pray to God Almighty for me."

"Now," said the priest, as gently as though he were addressing a mere child, "now tell me, my daughter, why you came to me."

"I came because I have committed a murder."

"Jesu mercy . . . is it true, then, for your uncle has told me the story, that you were guilty of the murder of your little stepbrother Greville . . . no, I cannot believe you . . . you could not have done such a thing, my daughter. . . ."

She burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands.

"Oh, I want to tell you—you will never understand. I hated him so much but I never meant to harm him. His mother was cruel to me, dreadfully cruel—she never bought me anything and took all my money from me. I counted for nothing in the house, but was I not my father's child? Then I saw him playing in the summer-house; he asked me to put the lantern-rope over the bar because he wanted to swing on it. I never thought of harm and I wasn't away in the house two minutes. When I came out, somehow he had got the rope about his neck and was struggling. Oh, my God! why did I do nothing? It was just as though some strong hand held me back and a voice whispered in my ear —'You hate him—you hate him.' When I did leap forward, he was dead—oh—Lord Jesus, he was dead and I would have given my life a hundred times to have saved him. What shall I do—Father, tell me, save me . . . I don't want to live . . . I can't live . . . oh, save me from myself."

Arthur St. Just listened to her with prayer upon his lips but his face had the pallor of a man struck dumb with fear and doubt. Never before had such a story as this been told to him. Pity of it, horror of it, the terrible thought of the duty which must be done, almost overwhelmed him. "Oh, God, help me to save her," he cried aloud. And then, looking at her, the tears came into his eyes and his words were broken.

"The world and the law will not call you guilty, daughter. You know in your own heart that you confess

to me your thoughts, not your deeds. You did not kill the poor little one. Yet the evil thought paralysed your will and because you hated, you could not save. It may be that all you tell me is the creation of your own imagination. You thought you could have saved him—you do not know that you could. Pray to God that nothing in your power could have saved your brother's life. Pray unceasingly and beseech the Blessed Virgin to pray for you also. Of course, you must tell this story . . . you must tell it in London to the police. Oh, be courageous and save your soul as this confession will save it. Go to-night, leave here . . . I will come with you if you feel that I can help you . . . but go you must for I can give you no absolution unless you consent to take this step. Do you not see that by so doing, you will vindicate yourself before the world. Yes, yes, you will go . . . and in going, you will win God's pardon and His blessing."

Sophie had listened, shaken by her sobs. She had feared this . . . the one course she believed she could never take. Exposure to the stepmother who had hated her . . . public humiliation, disgrace that would endure to her life's end . . . no, no, she was not guilty before the law the priest had said . . . why, then, should she be branded before the world?

"I dare not—dare not——" she ejaculated; "I would sooner kill myself."

"And lose your eternal soul. No, no, that is all that this world can inflict upon you when compared with the loss of the love of Jesus Christ and of His holy angels? You will abandon that thought here and now and for ever. And you will do what I wish you to do because it is your duty to God the Father of all men and to the justice He demands of you. Think it over, my child, and come to me again to-morrow. Pray that you may take the right course as I shall pray for you . . . and lose not the favour

of Jesus your Saviour, oh, I beseech you, do not lose it. . . ."

She did not answer him, but still sobbing, she crept from the church and the gloom of the winter's night hid her from his view.

Father Arthur, however, remained long praying before the beautiful altar of his little church; and it was seven o'clock when his servant Jacob came to tell him that his tea had long been ready for him and that he could not wait any longer to lock up the vestry and go to his home in the village.

CHAPTER VI

GHOSTS MAKE NO MERRY CHRISTMAS

Sophie Fordacre left her old nurse's cottage on the following day and went boldly to her uncle's house. The intense emotion she had suffered during her confession to Father Arthur had now given place to a phase of defiance.

Eagerly, she repeated the priest's words, that she was not guilty and had but imagined guilt. She could not have saved the boy Greville, so why should her conscience trouble her? Irish bravado would urge these arguments in loud tones. Let all the world accuse her, she would remain unafraid.

So she went to Quainton Grange and waited for her uncle. A shrewd knowledge of men encouraged her belief that tears and kisses were her best weapons with John Blake; and when she threw herself into his arms and wept almost hysterically upon his shoulder, the good-natured Squire immediately admitted her victory.

"Let a man say a word against you and he'll feel the lash of my whip," he said between the kisses; "ay, my pretty darling, don't you cry like this. What fault was it of yours . . . the lad came to his end by an accident and there's the end of it! We'll look the whole world in the face and tell them to be damned. Ay, and we'll hunt and ride together, and Christmas is coming and some of the old friends will be here. I've asked Hart-Brown and two or three of the soldiers from Warwick . . . there'll be no lack of fiddles and dancing . . . nay, nor of pretty wenches

either while you and Lucy are here. So dry up your tears, my pet . . . and not another word about it if you want to please me."

Sophie did not very much want to please him, but she was exceedingly anxious to please herself, and the warmth of his affection contributed to that end.

As for Lucy, perhaps she was a little jealous of the favour shown to one, who, after all, had brought some disgrace upon her at the school of the Misses Fawks; but she had always admired Sophie's "grown-up-ness" and she was glad to have a girl companion in the house. John, her brother, would be home from Malvern in a few days' time . . . and then, surely these three together could make a merry Christmas of it. So she told Sophie (also with kisses) that she would never believe a word that was said against her; and she sat up until nearly half-past eleven that night, poised at the end of the bed and telling her cousin all that she had done with Philip Hart-Brown in London and how he had bought her a beautiful pair of turquoise ear-rings and kissed her in the cab that took them to the house of the nigger minstrels, who were then fascinating all London at St. James's Hall.

"He kissed me too," said Sophie, with some little condescension, "at the Hen and Chickens during the festival week. I think he likes kisses and girls; but all men do, I suppose . . . at least they say so. Sometimes, I wish I were a man . . . they have such good times. We have the 'good' but not the times . . . at least, not until we are married."

"Why have you never married, Sophie . . . they say you've had a lot of chances?"

"Depends what you call chances, little wisehead. If a man says you're beautiful and then pinches your knees in the carriage, you don't see him going far as a husband. My misfortune is that all men seem to think I am fast and they

can do what they like with me. It isn't true, Lucy darling. It might be true if the right kind of man came along, but he hasn't so far . . . and so, I suppose, I shall settle down some time with the curate and we shall have eleven children and nothing but mother's money to keep them on. . . ."

"You'll never do that, Sophie; you're too romantic. So am I really, though nobody guesses it. I should like to live in a beautiful palace near a beautiful sea, with the sun always shining and a cavalier on a white horse coming to lunch and kissing me in a hammock afterwards. Adeline used to read all that in a French book she had away among her drawing things, but I always said I didn't believe it ever happened, even in London. Now, do you think it ever does, Sophie, do you ever think so?"

Sophie was a philosopher.

"It never did to me, Lucy, though that is not to say it never could have done. I had a dreadfully dull time at home —father's friends were all what you call "official"—some in diplomacy, some in parliament . . . and really if such people do govern England, I'm not surprised that there was that awful Crimean War or the mutiny in India. It was dreadful to have to sit on the edge of a gilt-backed chair and listen to them. And they all thought girls are such little fools and never grow up until they're married. If they had only known some of the things *I* was thinking about while they jabbered on."

"Perhaps it's a good thing they didn't. Adeline used to say that she always fell asleep at night making believe that she was in a boy's arms. She was very naughty . . . but then, who wouldn't have been with those two dreadful old women and that silly clergyman about all day? At least I have seen the last of them for ever—and we *can* hunt here and eat as much as we like—which is jolly nice anyway."

There was much consolation in this; and Lucy was quite right about the hunting. Next day found them riding

hard over the fine open country, which lay between Quainton and the Lickey Hills and the Squire was with them, as hale and hearty as ever and as fearless.

Many of their neighbours had met Sophie and all spoke to her pleasantly and were far too well bred even to hint at the terrible tragedy which had overtaken her father's house and in which she had played so painful a part. Indeed, she might have succeeded in blotting the whole thing from her mind if, in riding back to the Grange when the hunt was over she had not chanced to pass the Vicarage and there to see Father Arthur waiting for the afternoon post and for his daily paper.

He wore cassock and biretta as was his habit, and he smiled in a kindly way at Sophie, as one who should say: "I trust you and I am still hoping." She, however, rode on quickly, afraid of his eyes . . . and of herself.

Was her life, then, to be lived henceforth amid dreadful memories?

Bold as she had been before her uncle and her cousin, nevertheless, she knew that the shadow lay heavy upon her and would deepen. One night, just eight days after she had come to the Grange, she had a vision of little Greville and she did not know whether it had come to her sleeping or waking. Very clearly, amid the moonbeams which streamed into her room upon a clear night of December, she saw the child swinging to and fro as she had seen him upon that dreadful afternoon . . . and he cried to her as he had not cried then: "Save me, Sophie, you can, you can!"

So real was it all, that she ran screaming into Lucy's room . . . and the old maid, Eliza, had to be brought from her bed to comfort her. Happily, the Squire, who could sleep through any storm, did not hear the commotion and nobody dared to tell him about it. Lucy, however, was terribly frightened; and she found herself, from that day on, looking often at Sophie and wondering. How

unspeakably terrible it would be—if; but that was a shattering thought she would drive from her mind whenever it recurred.

About this time, also, John, the chubby-faced, blue-eyed John came home from Malvern school; and immediately the whole house was full of him. Being now of the ripe age of fourteen years, he could properly dictate to both the girls and see that they were kept in their places. His body showed a good many bruises, for those were rough days in school; and he bore the marks of sound canings. As, however, he had carried off the arithmetic prize—and also a good deal of his schoolfellows' pocket-money by the means of "swops," he forgot the stripes and remembered only the stars.

"A bright lad, John," said his father proudly; "takes after his grandfather, the brassfounder. He'll make a fortune in business some day—shouldn't wonder if he went back to Birmingham and set up a foundry for himself—that is, if he ever finds the money to do it, for God knows, I've got little enough."

Nobody believed him when he spoke like this, for belief in his riches was a whole creed for the villagers; and none but Philip Hart-Brown knew how poor he really was.

An ineradicable conviction that "things would come right somehow" had been Squire Blake's standby for many years and he refused, with an optimism which was unfailing, to face his true position.

"It will last my time out," he would affirm to Hart-Brown whenever that scheming lawyer tried to bring him to reason and restraint . . . and "last his time out" it had done so far . . . not unaided by some generous benefactions from his sister-in-law the Countess, and the generosity of his creditors in Birmingham, who remembered his father before him and the reputation for thrift and honesty

enjoyed by that astute brassfounder. No, they couldn't let the son go—it would bring disgrace upon all of them.

These were reflections for the common day, but at Christmas-time John Blake certainly would not hear a word of them. The season always made him ten years younger in spirit for the ten days it endured; and he and his great bay horse went whooping and halloa-ing all over the county.

"Damn it, I can joomp any fence in Warwickshire to-day," he would roar as he fell into the vernacular. And it would be "over lass," or "at it, Johnny," when his son and daughter were by his side over the glorious Warwickshire "doubles" . . . and away they would go, caring nothing for yesterday or to-morrow but only for the splendid excitements of the hunt and the freshness and glory of the morning.

"Now wasn't that a glorious half-hour," Lucy would say to her brother—and he, ruddier than ever but as unemotional, would rejoin—"Jolly hard on the horses though, and that old Colonel Philips down with his famous grey. It'll cost him something, Lucy, if the horse has broken a leg. I wish I had the money he must spend on those stables of his——"

"Oh, bother the money, Johnny . . . did you see Sophie chasing that young Lieutenant Wharton? I call it quite disgraceful. She's been by his side all day except when they disappeared in Pearman's thicket together. What were they doing there, I wonder. It does look so bad . . . and the Earl in the field too. I'm sure he'll tell Lady Wichfield about it . . . and we're in disgrace enough at the Castle as it is. Don't you really think Sophie might behave herself, at any rate in public?"

"Oh, what's it matter, Luce—they say Wharton is just too disgustingly rich for words . . . why should we care what they say. They don't give us anything, now do they?"

Lucy felt sure she was right, but she never could argue with Johnny, who was so stubborn and impossible to convince, and so she gave it up, not daring to accuse Sophie, who could fly into the most dreadful tempers and once had flung her violin at the head of her music-master. Besides, this Lieutenant Wharton was coming to their Christmas party . . . and perhaps after all he might propose to Sophie and take her off their hands. Very discreetly in bed that night, she mentioned the romantic possibility to Sophie and was surprised that the suggestion was not received more warmly.

"Me marry, Lucy—oh, my dear, how little you know the world. No man would marry me after what's happened —that is, no man worth marrying, and I don't want the others, thank you. If Mr. Wharton proposed to me, the house would fall down I should think. He might make some other kind of proposal, but you're too young to talk about that, so we'll forget all about it, dear, and just go to sleep like the two little cherubs uncle always says that we are."

Lucy, however, did not forget about it nor did Sophie; for the lieutenant joined the Christmas party two days afterwards and all the fun and riot of Christmas began. Such games they had: kiss in the ring and hunt the slipper and blind man's buff . . . and all played with uproarious merriment and not infrequently in the dark.

Two other cousins from Warwick had come over and a major and a captain had joined the amorous lieutenant and were themselves as ready for the flirtations and the kisses as that juvenile but enterprising officer. As for the Squire, he was all for "the old times" as he would tell everybody in uproarious tones—while at night he repeated the sentiment when the wassail bowl was bubbling and the boar's head was carried in to a triumphal march, as they carried it in at Queen's College, Oxford; and everybody

kissed everybody else incontinently and all honestly believed that this was peace on earth and goodwill both to men and to women.

Thus the story was written openly; but there were phases of it spoken in whispers.

Nobody but those interested knew just what the lieutenant had to say to Sophie, when he kissed her many times at her bedroom door that night . . . and perhaps it was well that nobody asked. A sullen rebellion against fate had been the emotion of Sophie's Christmas-tide. Why should all this disgrace have come upon her just because she had been unable to save little Greville? What had she done to deserve ostracism and cold looks and the implied suggestion that she was a pariah? Had she been a man, she would have said that they might all go to the devil. But being a woman, she fell to other thoughts . . . and a man played some part in them.

"Why shouldn't I have a good time," the argument ran; "they say nobody will marry me and I must grow up an old maid. I'll see them somewhere first"— here she was a true niece of John Blake—"I'll have a good time and they can think what they like about it. Why shouldn't I? Do they want me to go into a convent, then? Oh, I like the idea. Sophie Fordacre in a white veil and red flannel underneath. What a picture I'd make"—and she laughed aloud at the idea which had come to her.

Freddy Wharton, that boisterous lieutenant with his becoming monocle and his beautiful moustache. How would red flannel fit in with his ideas?

Upon that question she had no doubt and the thought of it suited the brazen mood very well. Nobody could do anything to her because little Greville had accidentally hanged himself—and why should she have troubled herself any more about it? She determined to forget and to act towards the world as the world acted towards her.

Christmas Day had passed by this time and the New Year was at hand. The guests had mostly left them and only Freddy Wharton and his colonel lingered on. The Manor House fell very quiet . . . and, in the early gloom of a winter's afternoon, it seemed the very home for the soft step and the gentle voice of Arthur St. Just, as that devoted priest crept into the library, where Miss Sophie, they told him, was writing a letter. His very presence spoke of ill news and her heart beat fast while she listened to him.

"Father," she cried—and waited.

"The worst has happened . . . they have arrested the maid, Harriet."

"Oh, no, no, she is innocent. Why should they arrest her?"

"She is accused of murder. You will have to go to London as a witness. I come to tell you. My child, nothing but the truth will save you now. You must tell it as you told it to me. For God's sake do not fail in your duty. An innocent woman's life is at stake. Your own may be in danger if you hesitate."

He left as he had come, with quiet step and kindly words to the servants, who knew him so well.

Sophie Fordacre, however, sat as one in a dream. The words, "ruin, ruin" rang in her ears. And she suffered such fear as she had not known even in her dreams.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE POLICE-COURT

THERE was snow upon the great trees in Hyde Park and skaters were flocking to the Serpentine as the crowd pushed and strove about the doors of the little police-court where a magistrate was to hear the case against Harriet Winsome, accused of the murder of the little boy, Greville Fordacre, in the garden of his father's house at Kensington.

Nobody quite knew why the charge had been made. Servants' tongues and common tittle-tattle appeared to be the basis of the accusation, which had already moved a dissenting public to a frenzy of displeasure and now could send an excited throng to the doors of the police-station and the newspapers to notes of exclamation.

"'Twasn't the girl. She never done it—they know where to look for the murderess, they do. That half-sister . . . what was she doing in the garden, I'd like to ask you that. Accusing a poor servant girl! I call that real wickedness now!"

These and other exclamations were to be heard everywhere as the mob tried to fight its way into that puny and heated room.

Carriages had been driven up to the place and many a society woman had no shame to seek admittance and to express displeasure with the vulgar who kept her out. Burly red-faced policemen contended with these perfumed and larded beauties and answered all their questions with a "Yes" or a "No, lady," as the occasion demanded. The whole

atmosphere was artificial chiefly because it was social. These people would not have crossed the street to see a burglar who had cut an old lady's throat.

So many were refused but some of our friends were there.

Philip Hart-Brown came, of course, for he had been entrusted with the defence of Harriet—and the Squire also was near by, wearing a dark blue coat with brass buttons and suggesting in every word and movement, concentrated disgust and fury.

Lucy Blake had, naturally, been left at Quainton Manor; but Sophie went into the room for the witnesses and there, for the first time since the tragedy, she met her father and her stepmother, though neither spoke a word to her either of sympathy or welcome. It remained for the two servants from Fordacre's house: Anna the parlourmaid, and Sarah the cook, to say: "Good morning, Miss Sophie" —and of these, one believed that Sophie had committed the murder herself and the other was there to try to hang her old enemy, Harriet.

Presently, the magistrate came in . . . a fat, good-natured little man, who had driven up to the court with a white rose in his buttonhole but had now discreetly left it in the waiting-room.

He bowed to the famous Queen's counsel who was conducting the case for the Crown, and the Queen's counsel bowed to him, as also did the young and promising barrister, Curtis Barnett, whom Hart-Brown had engaged for Harriet's defence.

"We don't want anybody bigger," he had said—"they haven't got case enough to hang a dog." So Curtis Barnett had the brief and he agreed that his should be an easy task. "Mere servants' gossip," was his verdict—"I can't think why they are doing it unless they wish to force somebody else's hand."

Philip Hart-Brown agreed with that.

"There's something behind it," he had said—and saying it, had thought of that pretty and passionate Sophie, she of the strangely seductive eyes with all their suggested mysteries. Did the police really think that she had done it . . . and had they put the maid in the dock to get the mistress's evidence?

Well, the hearing would show that—but anxious hours must be passed first. It was an alert and watchful Hart-Brown who listened to the opening speech of the prosecution and weighed every word of it.

"We shall show," said the huge and pompous man, who represented Her Majesty, "we shall show that this woman had on various occasions uttered threats against this poor child. We shall show that her treatment of the boy was often cruel and vindictive . . . and we shall establish the fact that she was under notice to leave Mr. Fordacre's establishment and that her ears had been boxed by her mistress on the day preceding this dreadful tragedy. Not, your worship, that I am here to apologize for the violence that has been shown to the prisoner. That was nothing to do with this court as a matter of principle, but as a matter of fact it is vital. The woman was about to leave the Fordacres' service; she was going in disgrace; she had uttered threats that she would do the very thing she has on our submission done; and upon those grounds and that evidence we demand her committal to the Criminal Courts, that she may there be tried by a jury of her fellow-countrymen."

The case seemed black enough against the girl; and many of the ignorant in court were already saying that the issue of it could not be in doubt. Motive there seemed to be sufficient to hang the prisoner and opportunity she had herself created.

"An artful hussy," whispered an old lawyer who sat next to Hart-Brown. "She put the rope round the child's

neck and then turned her back." Others muttered that the whole story was now plain, and they discussed it *sotto voce* until the usher thundered for silence and the disputants looked up to see in the box the inspector who gave evidence of the arrest and to hear the usual testimony of identification.

The former declared that Harriet Winsome had protested her innocence hysterically and had named "another" as the murderess. She admitted, however, to the threats and to the fact that her mistress had boxed her ears. The "already convinced" in the court relished this and prepared themselves for more dramatic revelations. They did not know how soon they were to come.

"Call Sophie Fordacre."

The Counsel for the Crown uttered the words in a confident tone and an usher needlessly began to bawl the name. Sophie, however, with Father St. Just by her side, was already at the door of the court and she went at once into the witness-box, a pitiful little figure, dressed in black and obviously weeping.

Not until she had thrown back her veil was the beauty of her face revealed, and then it astonished the many who had heard the tradition of it but had not previously seen her. Such eyes had not often looked into the face of counsel; nor could such glorious hair, men said, be discovered away from the pictures of the old masters. The whole court was hushed when she entered. Even the women sat entranced by this strange vision of youth's perfection discovered amid the grime of a police-court.

"Your name is Sophie Theresa Fordacre and the deceased was your half-brother?"

She answered, "Yes," but only those in the vicinity of the witness-box heard her.

"You were present when this poor boy came to his unhappy end. Will you tell the court what you know of it?"

Sophie looked up, her eyes stricken with terror. From the back of the court, Arthur St. Just watched her and his whole attitude was that of one who bade her be of good courage. Nevertheless, the words seemed denied to her and she continued to stare helplessly at the barrister who questioned her.

"I . . . I don't know . . . anything about it . . . I . . . I can't tell you . . . oh, it was awful . . . awful . . . I can't speak of it . . . I can't."

"Now please compose yourself, Miss Fordacre, and do not be afraid of anything or anybody here. We only want you to speak the truth. I know it is very difficult for you but it is your duty——"

"Yes, yes, Father Arthur told me that. . . ."

The Counsel looked at her in surprise.

"Father Arthur . . . but who is Father Arthur?"

"He is the clergyman at Quainton church . . . he told me what I must do."

A murmur passed round the court. Here was the breath of mystery surely. The whole case for the prosecution swung on its axis, as it were, and a new phase was revealed.

"Father Arthur told you what you must do. Then you have spoken to him about it."

"Yes, I went to him directly I returned to Warwickshire."

"For what purpose did you go to him?"

"To tell him that I was terribly unhappy."

"Nothing more than to speak to him of your unhappiness. Did you confess to him?"

The question troubled her greatly. It was evident that she was becoming more and more hysterical.

"I don't know why I went. I was unhappy. I felt I had to tell somebody."

"What had you to tell?"

"Oh . . . I . . . I . . . I wanted to tell somebody that I could have saved Greville . . . but I didn't, I didn't, I didn't."

A dead silence fell on the court. Sophie was weeping hysterically . . . the woman in the dock, who, hitherto, had looked like a hunted deer, suddenly showed them a hard and triumphant face upon which a curious smile had come. Even she, herself, had never guessed this riddle of the tragedy.

Counsel waited a little while and then returned to the attack.

"Miss Fordacre," he said gravely at last, "I must beg you to be more frank with us. What do you mean when you say that you could have saved this poor boy. How could you have saved him?"

Her answer was coherent but had the staccato of her hysteria behind it. Some force within the mind appeared to drive her to tell the whole truth and to tell it so swiftly that the burden of it should be thrown from her as quickly as possible.

"It was a sunny day although it was November. We all went into the garden after lunch and Greville played with his boat. Then he saw the rope and because he wanted to swing on it, I put it over the bar at the top of the shed. Then I went into the house to get a shawl because it was colder than I thought and when I came out again, there was Greville hanging on the rope. And I couldn't move—I couldn't—I couldn't—I tell you I couldn't—something kept me back—I tried so hard—and I couldn't . . . I couldn't. . . ."

Her hands were clenched, her face deadly pale. Even before Hart-Brown could reach her, she had fallen in a dead faint and lay motionless across the rail of the box. So they carried her out of court and so the Squire reached her side and called loudly for a doctor. He was like a man who

had without any warning at all received a smashing blow upon the face; one who had been left almost destitute of his faculties. Yet his first thought was one of the girl's folly and the priest's casuistry. Why had he not given his niece better advice? Why did he let her tell this damning story, which shock evidently had produced and hysteria encouraged?

The unexpected breakdown of this vital witness staggered the court and put the counsel for the Crown for the moment at his wits' end.

In answer to the magistrate, who asked him if he proposed to carry the matter any further that day, he answered after consulting with his solicitors, that he preferred an adjournment in which the whole case might be reconsidered. As to the prisoner in the dock, he could not say at such a stage that the case against her was abandoned; but he admitted that the evidence of Sophie Fordacre had altered the whole aspect of it. Nor could he forbear to express an opinion upon the conduct of Father Arthur, who, he suggested, had full knowledge of these facts and yet kept them from the police.

"In a Roman Catholic country," he declared, "such conduct would be understood. Here, in England, we shall not hesitate to call it by its proper name and to remind the reverend gentleman that he may have to answer for it in another place."

A hum of applause buzzed about that grimy court for the first time since the case was opened—it was to become a roar of disapproval resounding throughout the country before the week was out.

If the gentle missioner, who was the object of it, remained unmoved it was because his conscience wholly supported him and he believed that he had done his duty. The child, herself, had not vindicated the accused woman and done it nobly that day before the whole world? His duty as a

(Acc No= 138)

priest had forbidden him to speak; he would have gone willingly to the scaffold rather than have betrayed his divine office.

For these reasons, what the world said did not trouble him. He was the first after the Squire and Hart-Brown to be at Sophie's side when they carried her into the little waiting-room at the court and excluded all others. The Squire's whispered reproaches did not trouble him nor the angry lawyer's comments deflect him a hairbreadth from his purpose.

"You must send her away," he declared firmly, "she is very ill and needs rest; I will take charge of her myself if you will permit me. The Sisters at East Banstead will be glad to have her for a few weeks and all this will soon blow over. She has committed no offence. Her imagination suggests that she has and that is all. Let her go away, Squire, let me take her."

The Squire would have answered him with an angry negative—but Sophie herself had so far recovered that she overheard their conversation and immediately implored her uncle to let her go. "I will not return to Warwickshire," she said firmly; "I would throw myself into the river sooner than go there. Oh, uncle, let Father Arthur take me. I don't care where it is if I am with him"—and so on and so on, amid tears and sobbing and all those manifestations of distress which make so sure an appeal to the male when a pretty woman is the victim of them. In the end the men were ready enough to let her go, the Squire stipulating only for her father's consent and the lawyer declaring that the priest was the biggest damned fool in England anyway.

Greville Fordacre cared nothing what became of the girl or where she found a home.

He believed by this time that she was the actual murderess of his little son and nothing would shake that

conviction. Sophie's own words seemed to him an actual confession.

"She says she let him hang—what more can you want?" he would ask on many a day of sorrow afterwards. Such a man knew nothing of complex or reflex; he knew only that his beloved son was dead and that this mad girl admitted that she could have saved him.

It was nearly two o'clock when Sophie left the police-court with her uncle, the lawyer and Father Arthur. The police conducted them out by the little door which then led into the churchyard of the ancient parish church and here they found a private carriage waiting for them. But few of the mob were aware of their going and these howled their execrations after the priest. Jesuit and fornicator they named him; and even used stronger names. He, however, betrayed neither by word nor deed that he so much as heard them and even when a stone crashed through the window of the carriage he merely smiled.

"They will understand some day," he observed . . . and crossing himself, he added, "God grant it."

The Squire merely shrugged his shoulders a little contemptuously. As they passed down old Piccadilly upon their way to London Bridge station, the newsboys were already crying the story of the trial and telling all and sundry of "astonishing revelations." Next day those same papers and their morning contemporaries were announcing the withdrawal of the case against Harriet Winsome and in the same issue appealing to the Bishop of Wichfield to unfrock Arthur St. Just and send him about his business.

Sophie kissed her uncle at the station, though without any emotion. That bluff and honest man could find no ready words to comfort her—for like her father, he believed that in some way she had killed little Greville though how he could not say. Hart-Brown, more skilled in the know-

ledge of human impulses, thought that he understood, and his sympathies were wholly with the girl.

"I'll stand your friend whatever happens, Sophie," he told her on the platform, "write to me and let me know how you are—damn 'em, if they're not kind to you, I'll come and take you away myself."

She gave him a great hug for the words and so said "good-bye."

As they stepped into the train, a man at the door of the next carriage, observed to an elderly woman, his companion:

"Anyway, they know who did it now."

CHAPTER VIII

AT EAST BANSTEAD

THE little community at East Banstead, one of the first to be founded in England when "ritualism" followed upon the mild Catholicism of Newman, Keble and Pusey, was a nursing order governed by a gentle priest, who was himself both governed and bullied by a mid-Victorian bishop. The words of the latter were loud but his spirituality was not readily discernible even by his friends.

Crosses and candlesticks moved this good man to fury and he indulged in satirical reflections upon the saints when writing to his friends. The idea that good, rich women should befriend sick and poor women in the name of their Master, Jesus Christ, seemed to him a preposterous affectation of holiness which deserved nothing but jeers. For himself, he hunted, drank port wine, lived with one wife and daily thanked God that he was not as other men.

Meanwhile, the Reverend Sebastian Hield continued to do his good work at East Banstead and to do it with cheerfulness. When they stole his candlesticks, he bought others; when they hooted him at the convent's door, he smiled back upon them with a benevolence that many found irresistible. And, of course, when Arthur St. Just brought Sophie Fordacre to his gates, he threw them wide open to her and offered her a Christian welcome. Even Father Arthur's frank confession that if the people knew she was there, they might burn the buildings about his ears did not daunt him. "Let 'em burn," he said jocundly, "it's cold weather, anyway."

Sophie was in no mood to care what was burned or what was spared. She had no capacity for unselfish friendships —and, perhaps, she still thought it her due that men should bow down to her and do her pleasure. They gave her two pretty rooms at the convent and bright fires glowed in both of them. Father Arthur had already told her that she must write to him if she had need of his friendship— and he added his assurance that her uncle the Squire would not long delay paying her a visit. The intimation gave her little comfort. She felt that she had to face the world alone and a hard bitterness against all men already effaced in her memory the humiliation of the confession the priest had forced upon her.

Of the future she had no vista whatever.

That she could spend some years of her life amid these saintly and psalm-singing women, she refused from the first to believe.

Her imagination as a child had always carried her out into the great world of light and laughter and music. The Paris of the Second Empire was her dream. She would dance and sing there—but always in some lover's arms. Her morality ran ahead of her age by a good half-century and a confession of it would have ostracized her even in the days before the tragedy. She refused to believe that it was wrong to let a man make love to her if she loved him in return . . . her secret thoughts often frightened her, so that she would break off a conversation with another woman quite suddenly sometimes to ask herself: "What would *she* say if she really knew what I was thinking?"

Philip Hart-Brown came down to see her just a fortnight after the tragic events at the police-court.

The news he carried excited him and secretly he rejoiced to be the bearer of it to so pretty a creature. The law officers of the Crown had decided that nothing more could be done in the matter of the Kensington affair and

had determined to take no action against Sophie. They paid little heed to her confession, which they believed to be mere hysteria provoked by the machinations of a "Roman" priest; and while they condemned the man, they pitied the young woman. This was Hart-Brown's news and he did not fail to impart it with all his accustomed joviality and not a little loudness.

"Ah, my little Sophie," he began, kissing her as a schoolboy might have done—but with more than a schoolboy's art, "not looking so bright as I expected, my dear, but we'll soon change all that. How are you getting on now and how do you find yourself here? Kind women these sisters—God bless 'em—and kind to you, I make sure. Don't let 'em make you a Papist though—that's no good to anybody, now is it, my dear?"

Sophie, given to obstinacy and a love of contradiction, said at once that she rather liked Popery and was seriously considering "going over to Rome." But she laughed when she said it and the lawyer was reassured.

"How's my uncle, how's everybody?" she asked when the conversation was turned. "I suppose they're saying dreadful things about me—and poor Father Arthur. What have they done to him? Not hanged him, I hope?"

Philip looked grave.

"No, not that, but they've smashed all the windows in his house and pulled down his altar. He'll have to resign the living and go away. You see, my dear, we don't like confession in this country. We don't like the idea of a woman telling naughty secrets to men. Foreigners do that and it suits them. Here, we expect our wives to confess to us and pretty lies they tell us. Thank God, I haven't got a wife . . . that's why I keep young."

Sophie laughed. The colour was coming back to her cheeks and "the world" seemed a little nearer to her in the presence of this "jovial" bachelor, whose love affairs were

notorious. Sophie pitied the priest who would have to hear his confession.

"I should be sorry for your wife, Mr. Philip," she said slyly . . . she had always felt strangely attracted to a man who undoubtedly had loved—or made love to many women—and, after all, he seemed almost the only friend she had in the world; for, surely, Arthur St. Just had done her evil rather than good.

Philip turned the talk aside, though it did not displease him, and began to speak of their home affairs. The Squire was ill. The case had wholly upset him. Otherwise he would have come to see her.

"It's not against you, Sophie, that he's feeling. He's certain the whole thing was an accident, and public opinion is now on your side. People say that it is all nonsense to suppose you could have saved Greville—and, of course, it is so. The thing will blow over in a few weeks and then we must consider what we can do for you. You have five hundred a year in your own right and you won't starve. I don't think you should go back to Quainton—for the tongues are too sharp there and if Christ came among them, I don't think they would call upon Him. What I suggest is that I find you a home abroad for a year or two. Now, how would you like to go to Paris—eh, in a good English family there—wouldn't that be fine? Learn French and all their fallals and come back here when everybody's forgotten everything. That's what I propose and the Squire thinks the same. He'll come and tell you so directly he's well enough to travel."

"Not very ill, I hope, Mr. Philip . . . you don't think it's serious?"

Philip shook his head.

"Worry, my dear, that's what it is. He's up to his neck in debt and will sink in it presently. A generous, kind-hearted soul who never understood what money means and never will. I'm right down afraid for him sometimes, with

his little girl to marry and that boy, John, only half-educated. But there, that's nothing to do with you. What I want to tell you is, that you've nothing more to be afraid of where Greville is concerned and that when you're tired of this place, I'll take you to Paris as soon as you like and leave you in a good home there."

Sophie smiled a little curiously.

"Not too good, Mr. Philip."

"Oh, but, my dear——"

"I mean not to a place where they sing psalms all day—I couldn't stand much more of that." She shivered as though with evil memories, but Hart-Brown merely smiled a little meaningly.

"I know, I know, my dear. You want to see a bit of life . . . and that's what I like myself. Well, well, I shan't forget. Keep your courage up, my dear, and don't forget to write to me"—and rising, he kissed her again, not once but many times; and so he left her.

The sisters were going in to vespers about this time and Sophie went with them as she had done since she first came to East Banstead. The little chapel was bright with flowers and there were candles upon its beautiful altar—those candles which had given so much offence to Protestant England and had moved a bishop to episcopal frenzies. The scene was one of peace and holiness, but Sophie's thoughts were not there.

She was thinking rather of that city of Paris, where all was light and laughter, and women were not afraid to speak of lovers. A vision of it enchanted her as she dreamed through the weariness of psalms. All this praying, this humiliation, this gloom, was it truly demanded by the Supreme Being who made us?

After all, He did make us, was Sophie's untutored argument, and why should we be so miserable about it? She had determined already that she would not be if by any device she could be otherwise.

CHAPTER IX

THE SQUIRE PASSES

THERE was a very small field in Quainton village on the day when old Squire Blake hunted for the last time; and only the hardest came out to face the squalls of sleet and snow and the hard going the March weather had brought. The Squire, however, had both his daughter Lucy and his son John with him, and many declared that he was almost his old self again.

The comment of the county generally certainly had not been unkind.

You heard such phrases as: "Well, we can't be held accountable for our children and that's sure and sartin."

Others said: "It were all that parson, it were. What right had he to be mixing up with it? She didn't know she done it until he told her—I tell 'ee, I doan't hold with parsons, that I doan't."

Some again were quite sure that the maid, Harriet Winsome, had been the guilty party and that the whole story was a put up job to get her off. "You never know what these lawyers are up to, that you doan't." These were the most difficult to convince.

Lady Wichfield, at the Castle, was naturally moved to some righteous anger that even a distant relative of hers should dare to be the object of a public scandal. She repudiated Sophie at once and declared that she had never even seen her—a sour lie but one that served. The Earl

continued to "drizzle" with his beads and to complain of the impertinence of the masses. He had the theory that a similar crime was described in a German book by an author whose name he could not remember—and he wrote many letters to his booksellers trying to obtain a copy.

Squire Blake became more open about it all as the weeks passed and the gloom of winter was a little lifted. He began to see that Arthur St. Just had, after all, acted with wisdom and had behaved as a Christian gentleman.

One day, to that good priest's surprise, Blake told him that he would be at his church on the following Sunday morning, and then let anybody insult him who dared.

"You had to do it, Arthur, you had to," he insisted—and then, he asked "any trouble still with that scum? Are they worrying you now?"

Father Arthur smiled.

"Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. If the nail-makers from Cradley think of it, they come over on Sunday and sing a song or two outside the church before they go on to the Black Bull. Poor people. They work and keep families on eight or ten shillings a week, so why should you judge them? They will be tired of it in time—and I may even yet see them praying."

This was optimism; but there certainly were some ugly looking fellows about the door of the little church when the Squire, accompanied by Lucy and his son, that extraordinarily matter-of-fact youth of fourteen ripe years, came over on the following Sunday, to the great surprise of the village and the sorrow of that acid spinster, Mary Frobisher.

The roughs, ironically enough, were singing that music-hall song: "An 'orrible tale I have to tell," when the Squire strode up, and they did not cease even in his presence. Such impudence at such a date was almost unknown. John Blake could hardly believe his eyes or ears.

"Here, you fellow—what do you mean by this? How dare you demean God's house in this way? Take your cap off when you are speaking to me. I am a magistrate . . . and by God you shall go to the treadmill if I hear any more of it."

The man took his cap off—but another more bold came forward and addressed the Squire.

"Why should I be taking my hat off to 'ee? I be as good a man as you any day. We've as much right here as you have, and our daughters bain't going to the likes of this Roman Catholic here if we can stop 'em. So don't you talk like that to me or I shall have something to say to 'ee and that won't be to your liking at all, it won't."

John Blake had the crop he always carried, riding or walking, in his immense hand and his answer to the burly speaker was a blow on the head which felled him to the ground as though a thunderbolt had struck him.

"Now," he roared, surveying the stricken man contemptuously, "who else has anything to say to mé? Speak up you scoundrels for I am listening—who wants to say anything?"

A sergeant and two policemen from the village had come up while the talk was going on and the rabble quickly took the hint.

Nobody responded to the Squire's invitation to "speak up" and presently a shuffling of feet and some muffled oaths indicated that these very strict Protestants really had no enduring religious opinions and preferred beer to the Bible, all said and done.

Slowly they moved off to the village inn, there to take up the matter over several "pots" and it may be that not a man among them cared to remember that his wife and children were on the verge of starvation and that five days more must pass before even a few miserable shillings would come into the hovel he called a home.

Arthur St. Just preached one of his beautiful sermons that night, a truly evangelical discourse which any Wesleyan might have fathered. He talked chiefly of suffering as the handmaiden of salvation and but once referred to those doctrines of penance and penitence for which the bigots of the Protestant party had so roundly denounced him.

"Christ," he maintained, "undoubtedly meant something when He said to His disciples, 'whose sins ye forgive are forgiven and whose sins ye retain are retained.' It was an awful responsibility for any priest to bear, but he must do his duty. What was too often forgotten was the vital condition of repentance. No priest could absolve any man who was not truly penitent. No priest could retain the sins of a man who had Jesus Christ in his heart. Let them turn to the Cross, then, humbly and with gratitude, and so would they find salvation."

Squire Blake was moved by his utterance, but it gave him little real consolation.

Salvation for him must come, he thought, chiefly by way of his bankers. He was devilishly in debt and trying to add up pounds, shillings and pence most of the time Father Arthur was preaching. What a damned nuisance it was that people could not live on I.O.U's, and that other people must pester them for money. Taxes were light enough in his day and income-tax did not trouble the poorest—but he owed heavy money on his mortgages and God knew how he was to pay it.

Then there were the children. My God, what would become of them if he went bankrupt? Lady Wichfield, it is true, might do something for her kinsfolk; but he doubted her Irish temperament, while as for that damned fool of a husband of hers, he ought to be in a seminary for schoolgirls and not abroad among healthy men and women.

"A poor worm of a man." God help John if his

education were left to his uncle. And little Lucy, what would be done with her? Why, she might end on the streets for all he knew.

Thus did the eloquent sermon add but little to that good man's peace of mind. He was tormented all the night by the difficulties of his position—and when he rode out next morning upon his big grey "Jupiter," the bitter weather seemed attuned to his depression.

"There'll be little doing to-day, John," he said to his son; and that matter-of-fact youth replied that, if it were so, it was a pity to be wasting good corn on tired horses. John junior thought in terms of money whatever the occasion.

They rode across the valley, down towards King's Norton, then a pretty village—and so for some while they were in Staffordshire and upon the road to Kidderminster. Eagles' Wood sheltered no foxes and old Lord Fawley's coverts were drawn blank. There were, by this time, three of the Squire's "Christmas" soldiers in the field and the Squire observed with pleasure that pretty Lucy was their quarry. A fat hunting parson from the village of Harborne joined in this pursuit and quite forgot that he was no longer a bachelor; but the half a dozen sturdy farmers rode in grim silence as who should say: "What the hell are we here for and why don't we go home?"

So they went on, the snow holding them back a little about midday and even the sun glaring down upon the now whitened fields.

Willett, the huntsman, declared that no scent would lie on such a day and some of the field turned homeward at this, Lucy and her stout warriors among the number. Wisely they reflected that the bright fireside of Quainton Manor was to be preferred to any ditch; and good port wine was not out of their calculations. The master, old Sir Benjamin Hill, however, plodded on despite his allotted span, and after

him went Squire Blake, who remembered another day of the far distant years when his wife had ridden by his side on just such a morning . . . and so riding had set up that mortal illness which had robbed him in an hour of all that made his life worth living.

Strange years, truly, he had known, and few of them happy. His father, the brassfounder, had flogged him brutally when he had been still but a mere child; and although riches had come to adorn his home, meanness and anger and coarse living had done their best to nullify the tardy prosperity.

His mother had been long an invalid and his father affected that rigid puritanism which praised God on the Sabbath and made little children work for ten or twelve hours of the day for the rest of the week. Reaction, when the old man was dead, sent John to the devil; and for some years he was known as the wildest and maddest youth in Birmingham. Little had he reaped of that sowing . . . and now what of the future? He knew that he had few more years to live and the thought of death terrified him. The children—what was to become of them? How often he asked himself that question!

Such thoughts went with him as they passed from covert to covert and still heard nothing of foxes. Five miles from home, for they had made a circuit back towards the village of Harborne . . . and so to the Quainton Road, a fox was found in the orchard of Dr. Aston, that famous leech and sportsman, of whose hunting exploits so many local poets have delighted to sing; and for just ten glorious minutes hounds got away and ran without a check straight for Quainton and its woods. The Squire rejoiced to see them now, for this was the homeward way. His mood of reverie left him and he was, as ever, in the van. His last run on this earth it proved to be; for the big grey stumbled at the post and rails near Pearman's spinney and horse and

rider crashed headlong on the hard ground and there lay without sign of movement or of life.

Indeed, John Blake was dead when they picked him up and the master rode on quickly to the Manor to keep the children out of the way and the servants from those wild alarms which the servants of all ages have known so well how to affect.

CHAPTER X

SOPHIE FORDACRE GOES TO PARIS

Sophie Fordacre cried a little at East Banstead after her uncle's death, and more than once she forgot her own misfortunes and actually found time to say "Poor Lucy."

"Left with nothing at all," she told the sympathizing sisters, "and quite at the mercy of that canting old aunt of hers."

The nuns thought it wicked to use the word "canting," but they quite understood about the money, being too often in want of that, poor souls; and they much hoped that Sophie had written a kind letter to her cousin, in which the consolations of religion were not forgotten. Sophie blushed when she remembered that she had not. A frivolous note to Philip Hart-Brown was her atonement for such forgetfulness.

"I'm glad you found out about Lady Edith Wharton," she wrote, "if she really has a nice house in Paris and I can do what I like there, of course I will go. What I can't stand, Philip, is much more of this daily matins and evensong. I'm not actually irreligious, you know, but I'm not a hypocrite. And why should I be called 'dearly beloved brethren' twice every day of my life? I won't stand it, Philip. I'd sooner run away with the doctor here, who makes love to me every day though he's married. So that's why I'm glad I can go to Lady

Wharton, though, of course, I shall miss you awfully, Philip dear, and it's no good telling me I may have Lucy with me, for she's a little silly as I'm sure you know; and if she's still crying in Paris, it will be very jolly, won't it?"

The note was in answer to a letter from Philip, in which he had told her that old Lady Wharton, the widow of the late Colonel Frederick Wharton, K.C.B., and the aunt of the jolly young officer, Lieutenant Wharton, whom she had met at Quainton during the Christmas holiday, had fallen upon evil times and set up a boarding-house for English people at a house in the Champs Elysées, recently vacated by a French lady of distinction.

That French lady was Cora Pearl, the famous courtesan —but Philip did not think it necessary to mention the fact and confined himself to joyous prophecies of Sophie's happy future in such a mansion.

"It's a rattling fine house, Sophie, and full of jolly people, I hear. You know, the old girl was a bit of a rip in her time and our Queen won't have her near Buckingham Palace . . . but that's no affair of yours and you go to her just as you would go to any other hotel-keeper. I'll come over and see you both, of course—I've promised Lady Wichfield I would for Lucy's sake. Poor old John Blake hardly left more than would pay for his coffin—but I've got a few fine pictures and some good Eastern pottery of his and that may fetch a bit of money presently. Meanwhile, Lucy's at the Castle, though I'm sure her aunt and that grizzling uncle of hers wish her well somewhere else altogether. You'll have to be her guardian now, Sophie . . . and see old Lady Wharton does not get up to any of her tricks. We've got to marry Lucy well—for the sake of dear old John Blake, than whom there was not a better in the world."

Sophie clapped her hands when she read the letter; and it was to be noted that she sang the psalms with almost joyous fervour at evensong that night.

Three days later she was in old London again and Philip found her a room at the new hotel at Charing Cross and was just as fatherly as fatherly could be. The death of his friend John Blake had sobered him very much; and those little foolish flirtations in which he had indulged both with Sophie and her cousin were now remembered with some self-reproach. A good man *au fond*, he believed that the honour of the children was in his keeping.

"The old woman's been a rip," he argued, "but she's got good blood in her and she'll see that the children come to no harm."

Moreover, would it not give him an opportunity to run over to Paris from time to time, just to see how things were going on—and where else could you find young ladies, both in boot-shops and others, more willing to amuse middle-aged English gentlemen who possessed money!

This was the day when Paris truly was a "gay" city. The world had almost forgotten the means by which the third of the Napoleons had come to the throne; and in any case the prosperity of the living more than atoned for the sorrows of the dead.

Lucy and Sophie, hand in hand in a crazy cab—Philip fat and rubicund and jolly on the seat before them—rattled and rolled through a city of fine new streets and splendid cafés and mansions where aristocrats and adventurers lived side by side, and courtesans and cocottes alike held up their heads proudly.

The Court, ruled sternly by that magnificent lady from Spain, the Empress Eugénie, had become as brilliant as any in Europe; and stories of masked balls and floral fêtes, of

intrigue and love and jealousy and passion were written and told in the golden galleries of St. Cloud, Compiègne and the Tuileries almost every day.

It was a city that ate and drank as no other city before or since; a city where courtesans made fortunes which courtiers might have envied—a city of clever men and of charlatans—yet a city upon whose walls the decrees of doom were already written for those that had the wit to read.

Lady Wharton met her "guests" at the door of her fine house in the Champs Élysées and even Philip found her appearance a little startling. Balanced upon a long, a meagre and a narrow head was a ridiculous flaxen wig which even a child would have detected; while her wrinkled skin, her wolfish brown eyes and her immense mouth suggested the ogre of the fables rather than the living woman. On her hands was a confusion of rings with jewels of obvious value; but the pearls about her neck were as false as any pretence that she washed that part of her body or, indeed, any other.

"A dirty old woman," Sophie said directly she saw her—to which Lucy added the emphatic opinion, when they went to bed that night, that she was a nasty old woman as well.

Philip was stopping in Paris for two or three days, but not at the Hôtel Condé, as Lady Wharton's house was known. He knew a jolly little place in the Faubourg St. Honoré, where you had a little old-fashioned room with the "two candles," for which they charged two francs a night and where a bath was never asked for except in cases of illness.

Thence that merry fellow could sneak off to the "Boul Mich" and meet his Fannys and his Gretchens, his Mimis and Musettes, and laugh when he found himself outside some other and even smaller hotel at five o'clock in the

morning, with all his money gone and an acid taste of sweet wine in his mouth.

"Lucky the girls don't know anything about this kind of thing," he reflected—but hardly with wisdom, since old Lady Wharton talked chiefly about men from the first moment of her "guests'" arrival, and before the week was out had so frequently emphasized the dangers of Paris and the vicious habits of all in that modern Gomorrah that even the easy-going Sophie was alarmed.

"I think she's mad," she said.

Lucy, as shrewd despite her youth, thought that she was merely wicked.

Sophie suggested that possibly she was both.

"I do hope Philip knows all about her," she observed with some real alarm—this was on the Sunday after their arrival; "it seems to me that the men who come here are very peculiar and some of them think they can say what they like to us. Look at that old Duc de Marny who was at dinner last night. Well, you may not guess it but he pinched my knee under the table and would have done it again if I hadn't kicked him jolly hard in the shins. What sort of a house is it which 'finishes' the daughters of the nobility and allows that sort of thing to go on? I tell you, he'd have finished me all right if I had given him any encouragement, that he would."

Lucy was much astonished.

"I wish I'd written to her nephew, Freddy Wharton, whom we met at Christmas," she rejoined in her wisdom. "I believe he told me one night that he had a wicked old aunt in Paris and that nobody in the family would speak to her. We must write to Philip and let him know what is going on. I'm sure he can't understand what kind of a house this is——"

Truly Philip did not; but somehow that letter was not written. Sophie thought it would seem ungrate-

ful to badger their protector with any account of their troubles when he had but just returned to his home in Warwickshire; and Lucy usually did what Sophie desired.

The plain fact was that among the half a dozen odd people in old Lady Wharton's house, there was one young man who had interested Sophie from the beginning; and who had made such an instantaneous appeal to her always dominating and amatory impulses that she found herself almost in love with him before the second week had passed; and when the third Sunday came, a look from his eyes or the lightest pressure of his hand could set her aflame. Nor was she aware that the old harridan, who ruled over that strange and evil household, watched the progress of this affair with interest and desired to bring it to its obvious conclusion as soon as possible.

Lucy sent the tidings of all this to Philip in Birmingham, as she felt it her duty to do; but, perhaps, reasonably enough, that usually shrewd lawyer treated the matter rather lightly; and, believing it to be only a passing flirtation, assured his anxious ward that there was really nothing to worry about and that if there had been, Lady Wharton would have hastened to tell him—"for she dare not do otherwise," he wrote—so little did he know that strange old woman or her capacity for all that was depraved and vicious.

Lucy had described Sophie's new lover in terms that any young girl just from school might have used. The Vicomte de Joinville, she had written, was about thirty-two years old and supposed to be one of the famous family of the Joinvilles.

"Very good-looking, Philip, if you like the frizzy French type, which I do not. How we should laugh at him in the hunting-field! Yet he capers about on a beautiful

black horse and wears the gay blue uniform of the Lancers and always seems to have plenty of money and is, they say, a great favourite with the Empress and a certain old Duc de Marny, who has made such heaps and heaps of gold that he does not know what to do with it and so lends any amount to the Emperor, who spends such a lot. I don't like the man for all that and I am awfully afraid for Sophie. She told me in bed last night that she would never marry any man after what has happened—and oh, dear Philip, suppose there were to be a scandal, here in Paris and everybody so far away from us, what an awful thing it would be! There is nobody in this queer house I, myself, care to make friends with at all. The Abbé Henry is a bad old man they won't have in any church, I hear. Monsieur Bawdry is a testy old gentleman who is always talking about what the first Napoleon did and what an awful state Paris is now in despite its money. As to the two English people, Mr. and Mrs. Calefower—Sophie calls them cauliflower—they spend all their days in the museums and all their nights at the opera. The only other person is a little Spanish girl, Carmenita, very pretty and very sad. We don't know Spanish and can't understand what she says, but Lady Wharton makes out that the Vicomte once nearly married her, but that they had a quarrel and it's now all over and done with, though I must say he still seems very fond of her, though sometimes he is awfully rude to her."

This was the first of her letters; and when Philip answered it in a bantering tone, Lucy felt that she had done all in her power and that anything which happened afterwards was not her fault.

Nobody could blame her for not being wise beyond her years and, indeed, subsequent weeks reassured her and she began to say that Philip was right after all and that nothing

but a bold flirtation was likely to be the outcome of it all. So innocent was she and so very ignorant of the true state of affairs. And so clever was the old hag of a woman and so prudent in her own evil way.

As the spring came on and Paris shed its winter garment and put on its robe of tinsel and of roses, affairs were certainly gay enough at the Hôtel Condé and old Lady Wharton was in her element.

She took the girls to the museums; waxed eloquent over the pictures in the Louvre; drove out to Versailles and showed her guests the only bathroom in that vast and ridiculously empty palace; talked of Marie Antoinette and her love affairs very openly and plainly declared that life lost much of its savour when Louis, the Bien-Aimé, died, and that his had been the days to live in.

"Such rewards for clever women, my dears," she would say with a grimace on her crooked old face and an ugly leer in her once bright eyes; "no pretty girl wanted for money or love in those days. Pleasure from morning until night and the priests often as bad as the rest. Well, and why not? We are as God made us and that isn't for making mummy's faces in a world of laughter. No, no, *prenez vos biens où vous les trouvez.* That's my motto. We are a long time dead and we're fools if we lose our opportunities of happiness. I haven't, anyhow, and I don't care who knows. Ah, my dears, the number of men who used to love me and the beautiful things they gave me. All gone, all over;" and she sighed with a sigh of real regret, one of her few emotions which were not feigned.

It was some three weeks after this that the Vicomte de Joinville took the old woman to the Café de Paris and there had a heart-to-heart talk with her. He wanted to know all about Sophie; seemed to be honestly interested in her and asked so many questions that even his well-dined guest lost patience with him altogether.

"I have told you and I tell you again," snapped Lady Wharton, "that Sophie Fordacre is the niece by marriage of one of the oldest families in England and her father is a man of large means in London. They sent her to me to complete her education and because of some trouble in her family——"

The Vicomte pricked up his ears.

"Trouble, what kind of trouble?"

"Oh, one of her little brothers had an accident and was killed and some people thought it was Sophie's carelessness. But it wasn't anything of the sort—just the kind of accident that might happen in any family, though Sophie took it much to heart and has never been the same since, they say. That means that she's a highly sensitive young woman, as you can see for yourself, and the man who marries her will have to be careful what he's doing. I would think twice about her for a wife if I were a man——"

"She has money though, Edith . . . you said she has money?"

"Did I? Depends what you mean by money. Are you thinking of marrying her yourself, Albert? You seem curiously interested?"

The young man lighted a long cigar and seemed to reflect upon his answer.

"If you had asked whether I were in love with her, I should have answered you that I have rarely been more in love with any woman. But marriage. My dear Edith, who are you and I to discuss the sanctity of marriage?" . . . and he laughed drolly while the old woman shewed her far from beautiful teeth and filled her glass once more with the fine old liqueur brandy.

"Well," she suggested, "so you have thought about it."

"Yes, I have thought about it."

"Asked her, Albert?"

"Not yet. I come to my spiritual mother first for wisdom. You see my difficulties. I am the favourite of a high personage, it appears, and she is watching my career with interest. If there were any scandal made by English people at my expense, my career would be shattered like a broken glass. As many women as you please is their code at the Tuileries . . . but you are ruined if, because of women, your name is in the newspapers. On the other hand, if the adorable Sophie is really well-born, as you say, and has anything substantial as her portion—well then, it is another matter altogether. That is why I am talking to you about it. I must find out, Edith—I must know."

Lady Wharton feigned to sigh and a clever assumption of perplexity was to be read amid the rouge and the wrinkles of that ancient face.

"You all come to me, all of you," she protested with emphasis; "whether you have a mistress to get rid of, a horse to sell or a cocotte to hire—you think first of old Edith. 'She's wise,' you say, 'she knows the world; she wants money. She'll help us if we pay her something—just a little something we should be ashamed to give to a *bonne* or a *fille de chambre*.' That's what you all say and I'm such a fool that I listen to you. Well, it's my nature, I suppose. I was born like that, meek and humble like little Carmenita here. You seem to have forgotten her, Albert. What's she going to say if this marriage goes on? What about your name in the papers then? Do you think she'll hold her tongue when her lover flaunts an English murderess."

"Murderess, good God. She's not that!"

"Certainly not, but somebody will tell Carmenita that she is and it will be the same thing. Carmenita will set Paris on fire if you give her half a chance. And don't

forget her brother is the Captain of the Civil Guard at Saragossa. He might cut your handsome throat, Albert dear, and that would be a nice thing for me, who get three thousand francs a year to educate her in deportment and the Christian religion. You haven't thought much about Carmenita, I suppose."

Albert shrugged his shoulders.

"Too sentimental, Edith—that's what Carmenita is. Says an *Ave* every time I kiss her and a lot more, saints and all thrown in, when it's something better than kissing. I see your point, though. She probably would throw up her heels if I married Sophie—and I dare not have a scandal. The question is what's to be done? I'm too much in love with the girl to let her go. I'd risk half I've got to have a success there—and, my dear, if you can help me, it won't be something for a *bonne* or a chambermaid. It will be half a dozen new gowns at Worth's and a diamond brooch thrown in. Upon my word of honour, as a man and a soldier, I'll do what I say."

Lady Wharton nodded her head, almost as one numbering the items in a contract presently to be drawn.

"You're a generous man, Albert—your old mother must be delighted by the way you spend her money. And I like your passion, my dear. I've felt like that about a man more than once in my life. Six months after I married Wharton, there was a fair-haired young German doctor at Baden. I'd have sold the crown jewels to have been his choice."

"You were, of course, Edith?"

"That is my affair. I am not here to confess but to help. You want this girl and one thing is as clear as the sun. You can have her any day you please . . . and she will be the last to talk about marriage. I know that much because her cousin, the little simpleton Lucy, told me as much only a week ago. 'Sophie is determined never to

marry any man after what has happened,' she said, 'she is sure the past would be brought up against her and she won't take the risk of that.' You see, I hear these things, Albert. But all that granted, you've got plenty of work to do. Don't, for the Lord's sake, go to her and treat her as though she were a prostitute. She's not that kind. You must rave like an actor and seem to mean it."

"I should mean it, Edith. Have I not said how much I am in love with her?"

"Oh, I know you men and your love. Hot kisses for a week and then morning yawns. All the world forgot, and then the day when you wake up very early to get your letters and begin to ask what they are doing in Paris. It may last a little longer with Sophie because she really is a beauty. But don't forget there's a lawyer man in London and, unless we're very careful what we're doing, there'll be trouble there and ambassadors mixed up with it. I can't have that. My living depends upon the good name of my house. I'll be in no scandal, Albert, for you or any man."

Albert looked very crestfallen.

"Then you don't mean to help me, Edith?"

"I don't say so. But you must play your part. Ask her to marry you. Hear what she says. It's a risk, but a small one—and the fact that you asked her will protect me. After that we'll talk about St. Cloud and the cottage. You remember my little villa at St. Cloud, Albert. Well, the Emperor slept there once and, quite by accident, that little Margaret Boulanger girl happened to sleep there too. It was before he took a villa at Compiègne for her. The little she-devil! She waited under a tree in the park for him during a thunderstorm, in a pretty muslin dress. She was soaked to the skin when he saw her. Of course he threw the rug out of his phaeton that she might cover up her pretty shoulders. A month afterwards he was uncover-

ing them at Compiègne and Eugénie was asking who the lady was. A clever child, my dear, though she did make a mess of things afterwards."

They laughed together at the idea, but hearing Sophie's voice in the vestibule without, the conversation was adjourned *sine die*.

CHAPTER XI

THE REVIEW AT LONGCHAMP

THERE was a great review of the troops at Longchamp a few weeks afterwards and historians have told us that it was one of the greatest spectacles the military—or any other world—had ever seen.

Napoleon III had a genius for display and the splendour-loving Empress abetted him in all his designs to captivate the imagination of the Parisians and to enhance his own glory.

And truly, if gold and silver, or the prancing of black horses, or the blare of bands, or the kaleidoscopic mingling of colour could have established the glory and the greatness of France, the third of the Napoleons would have done it.

Even the rainbow should have blushed had it looked down from heaven that day. For lancers, scarlet and blue, were there and *chasseurs à cheval* all silver and steel; gunners in green and Zouaves in their baggy trousers, and dashing hussars and infantrymen in their blue tunics and their wide red breeches . . . and Generals dashing to and fro to wave their plumes before the populace; and bugles blaring and such a clinking of swords and a crying of commands that the greatest battle in history might have been waging and *le beau pays* already the victor.

Proud indeed were the Parisians as they tramped home that afternoon to their glorious city Paris, with a fine sun of April shining down upon them and all the acacias in the glory of their bloom. Splendid horses were there

drawing splendid carriages through the avenues of the Bois, and the wonderful gowns of notorious women to be seen, and cocottes elbowing courtesans, and even Lord Cardinals beaming upon a multitude which envied their palaces but were quite willing to leave them their piety. A great day upon which the gods evidently smiled. And woe, they said, to any foe of a nation which possessed such an army as that whose evolutions they had just witnessed.

Sophie and Lucy were with old Lady Wharton at Longchamp that morning and a happy day they made of it.

Of course, they picked out Albert de Joinville capering on his great black horse in a sky-blue uniform that almost put the empyrean to shame.

How handsome he was, the girls said . . . and how Sophie's heart beat while she watched him! Her very existence, she thought, now depended upon her success with this handsome soldier and she cared not how soon he would propose to her. Yet he had been a lagging lover so far and sore weeks had passed since she had known even a *tête-à-tête* with him.

Sometimes he would look at her in a quizzical way when he came from the Tuileries to the Hôtel Condé, as though trying to read her secret and, perhaps, half-succeeding in doing so.

A great fear possessed her at such a time and she renewed her determination not to marry him whatever the cost.

No, no; she loved him too much to put him to shame and she knew well what Paris would say if the truth ever came out and the whole story of little Greville's death were told in the French newspapers.

"I should lose him then for ever," she argued—and waited in a very fever of doubt until he should make the great avowal.

Edith Wharton, that restless old schemer, had planned the occasion well; and when the review was over, she took

the girls in her old barouche away towards the new restaurant of the Cascade; and then farther on towards the woods of the old Château de Madrid, where Henry II had made love to Diane de Poitiers, and Charles IX and Henry IV had so often led their mistresses.

Here, to an arbour of the glade, her servants had carried their breakfast . . . and here, later on, came Albert de Joinville and boon companions of his who had now escaped the glories of a deathless combat and were ready enough for the lighter joys of wine and women. A merry feast it was, young men in their glittering uniforms squatting on the new-grown grass and young women very ready to crown them with flowers.

None knew better than Edith Wharton how to give an alfresco party of this kind and since some of her "guests" were paying the bill, she had spared neither pains nor money to make her party one of which people would talk.

Actually, a *maître d'hôtel* from the Café Riche had superintended her love-feast, as she chose to call it, and waiters from the café served a wonderful banquet, where the food was worthy of a city of cooks and no better wine in all France was to be found.

Of this the soldiers partook uncritically, but the ladies with more mature delight. Had not these women, these Coras and Adriennes and Marguerites, who were my lady's guests, sat often at the tables of the richest and most vulgar of the plutocrats of Paris?

"Neither courtesans nor cocottes, my dear," she would explain; "just dear women who, perhaps, do not always guard their virtue as closely as they should. But at heart, true women or, of course, I would not know them."

Thus angelic Lady Wharton, a K.C.B.'s relict who cheerfully allowed herself to be called "the Lady Edith" that the ignorant might mistake her for the daughter of a duke. Some people said that these Coras and the others in question

had lost their virtue largely because of her contriving. Not for nothing had she a villa at St. Cloud and a rascally old man, with a wife no less qualified in debauchery to run it for him. How many women had repented (or rejoiced in) the few "quiet days" they had spent at St. Cloud with the Count of This or the Captain of That, or some other profligate who had happened to find himself in the neighbourhood! No wonder the good Empress declared sometimes that she would have her ladyship driven out of France; and in the end was as good as her word. But that is another story and we are writing of what befell upon that memorable day of April in the year 1864.

They had a wonderful breakfast, then, and afterwards went walking two by two in the beautiful woods which, at that time, surrounded the Château. Pretty little Lucy, to her dismay, found herself *bras dessus, bras dessous* with that old rogue the Abbé Henry, who, for the first time for many a day, remembered that he had been a Christian and actually taught the fascinating English "miss" a great deal of the history of the Bois de Boulogne, of its sheep and of its goats . . . and even of the gay ladies who once made the convent at Longchamp the most musical habitation in the vicinity of Paris, and actually had all the great opera-singers of the day to waft sweet music from the gallery of the chapel. Veritably did the Abbé delude himself during those pleasant hours with the idea that he was Lucy's "Father-in-God" and must protect her. "A true *ingénue*," he declared afterwards; "we must see that she comes to no mischief. Is she not the niece of an English countess—beware what you are doing there, or certainly there will be trouble for you."

Old Lady Wharton was quite alive to this.

"It's the other one who will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave," she admitted with bird's tears in her bilious eyes. "This child is no trouble at all. She's altered

for the better even while she's been here. I shall teach her French and send her home again. But, Henry, that Sophie girl! Did you ever meet her match? Have you watched her with Albert? My dear, it's as good as an affair altogether. And I have warned her until I am tired."

Abbé Henry shook his old grey head wisely; but the glance he turned upon Edith was the glance of one who would say: "And this to me, who knows. Be ashamed of yourself, old woman, for this is not the talk to which I will listen."

Aloud, however, he merely observed:

"Albert is proposing to marry her, I hope?"

"If he had not said so, do you think I would leave them together as I have done? No, no, I know my duty. If anything happens, it will not be my fault, as you must tell everybody when you are asked. 'She did her best,' you will say; 'poor Edith.'"

The Abbé promised; but mentally he said to himself: "It will be odd if I do," and that resolution he meant to keep. Unfortunately, perhaps, for the passionate Sophie, word of the affair did not get about for some weeks and then it was no fault of the lovers.

"Our secret shall be our own, I swear it on the Cross," Albert had said to her that momentous afternoon in the woods of the Château de Madrid. But he had not spoken of marriage as he had meant to do, for Sophie's protests had cut the words short on his lips.

Of course, she would remember that afternoon to the end of a life which was to know more of sorrow than of joy and to lead her often to darkness rather than to light. The cool, silent woods; the glassy pools; the sheltering glades; the song of birds—how those memories clung to her through the years! And she had loved the man with all her very soul. He opened his arms to her and cried "Sophie" and she answered him without one reservation of regret.

"You know it, now, Sophie," he cried in ecstasy, "you know that I love you—yes, yes, yes; I have never loved another woman as I love you. I swear it. I will be faithful to you with my last breath. Ah, my heart, my very life, I hold you in my arms. Nevermore will I let you go. I swear it. My Sophie," and so to the old oaths and the kisses and the raptures; the eternal story of a man and a woman knowing neither good nor evil but only the passion dominating both.

So did Sophie Fordacre become the victim of Albert de Joinville, and so was the second chapter of her strange life written . . . in the woods of Longchamp upon that April day.

CHAPTER XII

PHILIP HART-BROWN HEARS THE TRUTH

SOPHIE had too much wit to tell anybody what had happened to her in the woods of Longchamp and, for some weeks the affair was kept a profound mystery.

Even had Father Arthur himself come to Paris and implored her to confess to him, she would still have remained silent.

As many a woman before her time and since, her first passion for a man was something so wonderful, so sacred, so enthralling, that torture itself would hardly have opened her lips. Day and night she dreamed of Albert de Joinville, of the fire in his eyes when he had embraced her, of his warm kisses, of his vows, of his handsome face. The very fact that this was a secret, a dangerous liaison, added to its furtive joys. He was hers, that splendid soldier, that dashing lover, that young man whom so many women had desired.

So she told nobody and only Carmenita guessed. A silent child, meek and long suffering, she had, nevertheless, the spirit of a true Spaniard when the fidelity of her lover was at stake; and that Albert de Joinville had been her lover was no secret at all. Now, she found herself not only deserted but humiliated beyond endurance. And there was a further reason for her anger which drove her almost to madness as it became more apparent. She feared that she was about to have a child and of that horror she hardly dared to think, unless it were in the silent watches of the night.

Carmenita first began to speak to Lucy about the doings of her cousin, Sophie, just a month after the alfresco party at Longchamp; and very cunningly she tried to pump the little English girl to see what she knew.

"Your cousin goes often to St. Cloud now," she said one night when she had crept into Lucy's bed and declared that the "ghosts" had frightened her . . . "does she so much like the country, then, Lucy dear?"

Lucy, who had been but half-awake until this time, sat up in bed and listened with all her ears. She did not tell Carmenita that she, herself, had also become very anxious about her cousin; but she was very willing to talk of it and hastened to show how wide-awake she was.

"Why do you ask that, Carmenita? I don't think Sophie is fond of the country at all. She never used to be. Sometimes she did not come to our house in Warwickshire for months and then it was to tell us about all the parties to which she had been going in London. If she says she's fond of the country now, I believe it's all humbug. It's that man, Albert, she's fond of, though she swears she isn't every time I tell her so."

Timid little Carmenita was greatly encouraged by this avowal, and nestling close to Lucy in the bed, she quickly became more confidential.

"I'm glad you say that, Lucy. I thought so myself, but I didn't like to say so. You know Albert loved me once, though he doesn't love me now."

"Loved you—but Carmenita, you never told me! Oh, what a wicked man he is. And now to be pretending that he loves Sophie and she to be listening to him."

Carmenita sighed.

"I knew how it would be, that day of the party at Longchamp," she said, almost tearfully; and then, "well, that's what happened to me last year; and oh, my dear, how I wish to God it never had. How, how, I wish it!"

Lucy was a little frightened by this. The silence of the night and of the city without, the darkness of the room and only the feverish eyes of this little friend of hers shining from the shadows all contributed to her presentiment that some dreadful story was about to be told and that she must listen to it because she was the only friend little Carmenita had in all that house of evil.

"Carmenita, dear," she said, after she had thought upon it a little while, "I am so sorry for you, dear. Do you really think that Sophie has done wrong with Albert? Can you possibly mean that?"

Carmenita was in no doubt.

"I know it," she exclaimed almost savagely, "I knew it directly I saw them that night. He couldn't look me in the face and she was actually trembling with excitement. And they are both such liars. Did you hear her say yesterday that she would love to spend Sunday at St. Cloud because her old friend, Adeline de Haute Croix, the one who was at school with you, was coming over and they would all have a picnic together. Then *he* said: 'I shall be away at Chalons with the regiment,' and I know that isn't true because young Lieutenant Boulanger told me it wasn't—besides, as I have said, Albert is such a liar and, of course, they've gone together . . . and, oh Lucy, it's awful and I can't bear it because, oh, my God, what shall I do, what shall I do when my baby comes? Lucy, dearest, what shall I do?"—and turning about, she buried her face on her little friend's shoulder and wept like a child.

Cause for tears assuredly she had. Alone there, in that city of exile, without one human being to offer her sympathy, much less love, her only relative that soldier brother away in Spain at Saragossa—well may she have asked what she should do—well may she have cried to God to help her.

Lucy, a mere child herself, trembled from head to foot when she heard this tragic narration and for some while her

mind merely groped to find the threads of the story and to put them together. A child! Sophie ruined as this poor little Carmenita had been.

Here, surely, for one who had lived in mid-Victorian England, was woe unutterable. All her impulse was to get up there and then; to fly from such a scene, to go she knew not where for help and counsel. But there was Carmenita sobbing as though her heart would break . . . and nothing but the sound of her sobs could be heard in the silence of that stilly night. Lucy kissed her friend again and again. Oh, it was awful, awful; and she, in turn, was now asking what she should do.

"Carmenita, darling," she whispered at last, "oughtn't you to tell somebody? Oughtn't you to write to your mother?"

"Dear, I haven't a mother—both mother and father were killed at St. Pierre in the earthquake. There is only my brother Ramon and how—how could I tell him? You know that I couldn't; Lucy, you know it."

Lucy, some of the determination of her dead father, John Blake, in her active mind, instantly took a resolution.

"If you don't, I shall," she declared with vehemence. "Oh, I think it's dreadful that you should be here without any friend and suffering this terrible, terrible trouble. I shall insist that you give me your brother Ramon's address, and I will tell him that he must come to Paris immediately. As for Sophie—well, I'll soon put a stop to that wickedness. To-morrow, I shall send a telegram to Philip and to her father. They'll settle with Mister Vicomte, or whatever he calls himself. I wouldn't like to be in his shoes when Philip begins to talk to him. Oh, you wait! This wicked old woman thinks she can do what she likes with us English girls. Well, can she, that's all I ask myself!"

Carmenita was very grateful for her sympathy. But she was adamant in her refusal to give Lucy her brother's address or to promise to write to him herself.

"You don't know how proud he is," she said, "and he would never forgive me. Perhaps he would never see me again, Lucy—and what should I do then? He is rich, but I have nothing. Oh, I might sink, sink until I became like one of those poor creatures in the streets. That's what might happen to me and I have often thought about it."

Lucy told her not to think of such a thing and she declared moreover, that she, herself, would always be Carmenita's friend whatever happened.

"Father left hardly any money, dear, but my uncle, Lord Wichfield, is awfully rich and he has promised to look after me. And, you be sure, I'll look after you as well. Perhaps you're frightening yourself too much, Carmenita. Of course I don't understand it all and I'm not the one to tell you; but I should think you ought to speak to some older woman about it and hear what she says. Albert's an awful scoundrel to treat you and Sophie as he has done and if nobody punishes him, I shan't believe in anything any more. Now go to sleep and try to forget it all. Oh, I will be your friend, I swear I will. Carmenita, you will trust me, won't you, darling?"

Carmenita declared that she would and at the finish she dropped into a nervous sleep when day already had come. Her avowed intention to keep her brother's address from Lucy failed miserably, for that astute young lady, endowed clearly with some of her grandfather's wits (he, the famous brassfounder of Bingley Street, Birmingham), managed most cunningly to get what she wanted from old Lady Wharton upon the following morning and by two o'clock a letter was in the post office directed to "Captain Ramon Anzano" at the barracks of the Civil Guard in Saragossa and not a soul in the Hôtel Condé knew a thing about it—not even little Carmenita to whom it meant so much.

It was a childish letter, but no man could have failed to understand it.

"Please come to Paris at once," it said, "as your sister is in the greatest trouble and there is nobody to help her."

She signed it, "her friend, Lucy Blake," and left it at that.

When she had sent it, she remained in the post office to send two telegrams to England as she had promised Carmenita to do.

One was to Philip Hart-Brown, the other to Greville Fordacre, Sophie's father. To the former, she addressed the simple appeal:

"Please come and take us away from this dreadful house."

To the latter she said:

"Sophie is in danger here; please come and take her away."

Poor little Lucy, the effort emptied her slender purse and she had but ten francs left in the world when it had been made.

Of course she expected something to happen immediately, but for some days life at the Hôtel Condé went on just in the usual way, though neither Albert de Joinville nor Sophie came to Paris, that "poor dear child" being, as Lady Wharton observed—almost with tears in her cracked old voice—sadly in need of a little country air and quiet after all the excitement of Paris . . . and what could be better for her than the repose of the villa at Saint Cloud, with the quiet woods all about and the roses presently to bloom and all the rest of it.

So she put it, at any rate, but she made no attempt to explain the Vicomte's absence from the house; and, indeed, she seemed almost unaware of his existence. This reticence

deceived neither Lucy nor Carmenita and they spoke of it apart with anger and disgust.

"As if we didn't know where he was, Lucy."

"Picking the rosebuds for her and telling her she's beautiful. Oh, it's a shame, Carmenita, it's a cruel shame. And I don't hear a word from Philip or her father. They can't be so cruel as to leave us here now that they know what's happening. I'll believe that when they tell me so, not a minute before."

This absence of any reply to her letter and telegrams was indeed distressing, and naturally she did not know what to make of it. And no doubt she would have gone on worrying more and more if there had not arrived at the Hôtel Condé a wholly unexpected visitor and one whose appearance was as welcome to Lucy and Carmenita as it was distressing to the aged harridan who was the mistress of that strange house.

LIBRARY
101

CHAPTER XIII

THE AFFAIR TAKES A DANGEROUS TURN

FREDDY WHARTON'S father was a shipbroker of Lombard Street, Harold Thawstone Wharton, whom the city knew to be among the richest of its rich men. But Freddy had no liking for the ships and had played with tin soldiers when he was still an infant.

Now he was in the Sixth Dragoons—the famous Carabineers—and recently his regiment had moved to Canterbury for those spring "manœuvres" in which the War Office delights. Quite by accident had he heard of his aunt's latest activities in Paris; but when he did hear of them his indignation was unrestrained. The girls had made a great appeal to him when he met them at the old Squire's house at Christmas.

"Good God," he cried, when he heard of it, "how did the old bitch get hold of them?" It was evident that his affection for his aunt was not profound. And naturally, as the best type of soldier, he felt a great responsibility in the matter. Was not Sophie the niece of that capital old sportsman, John Blake—and Lucy—why she, of course, was closely related to the Countess of Wichfield; at least, Freddy believed so, though he did not know very much of the family history.

"A jolly pair of girls," he had told himself after that Christmas party. "Sophie's a devil of a flirt, but Lucy's the stayer all right."

And now they were in Paris in a house which the Emperor himself had referred to playfully as a brothel.

Freddy felt that he, himself, was in some way responsible for it, even though he had hardly mentioned his aunt's name to the girls.

"The old devil finds out everything," he argued; "she must have heard somewhere of my being with the Blakes and put in her prospectus on the spot. The old cat! If anything happens to the kiddies, it might ruin me in the service. I'll go to Paris, that's what I'll do"—and getting leave that night, he took train for Dover, and the crazy little paddle-wheel steamer carried him across the Channel, while a roaring, bumping "Rapide" landed him at the Gare du Nord at eight o'clock the same evening and a poor thing of a cab put him down at the newly-built "Grand Hotel" in time for dinner and a visit to the Casino afterwards.

"Better go up in the morning," he reasoned; "the hag might be having one of her wild parties and I don't want a scene before the crowd. No; I'll sleep on it and drop in when nobody's about. Then I can give her a bit of my mind."

Good boy, but he hardly slept upon it after all!

There were charming ladies in the Casino, and their motto in life was that, the more they took off the more they got on. Two of these were so polite as to offer to sup with Freddy if he paid the bill: while others were equally affable and ready to drink sweet champagne with him to any toast he cared to propose. It was three in the morning when he got to bed and his head ached consumedly when, at eleven next day, the hotel porter procured him a fiacre, whose jovial driver wore a blue waistcoat and a red hat, and in which ancient vehicle he set out gaily for the Hôtel Condé.

It was a fortunate moment to arrive.

Lady Wharton, he was told, had set out that morning for St. Cloud and was not expected to return until after dinner. There was nobody in the house except the two young ladies, Mademoiselle Lucy and Mademoiselle

Carmenita. Freddy knew nothing of any Carmenitas, but he asked at once for Mademoiselle Lucy; and so great was that troubled young lady's pleasure at seeing him, so sincere her delight, that an open-faced, honourable English soldier should come to the house, that she ran up to him with open arms and kissed him as though he had been her own brother. Freddy had no objection to this at all. Had he not kissed her under the mistletoe bough at Christmas, and was it not a good French custom after all?

"Oh, Freddy, Freddy, how glad I am!" she cried again and again; "and you have come all the way from England and you'll take us away from this dreadful house—now, won't you, Freddy—for my dead father's sake, Freddy, you'll take us?"

Freddy, of course, by all the oaths known to men and soldiers (and the latter are authorities upon oaths), swore that he would do as she desired. Nevertheless were his thoughts all a tangle and his perplexity unconcealed. He had guessed that the Hôtel Condé was quite the wrong place in which the relations of earls should reside: but of the facts he knew nothing. Here, now, upon the very threshold was the cry of disaster.

"Of course I will do everything in my power, Lucy. But I don't understand, dear. What is it? What has the old woman done to you? Why are you so jolly glad to see me? You must have some reason. Tell me all about it now. Don't be afraid. Speak to me as you would to your own brother, if he were old enough. I'll do the right thing when I know. You may be sure of that."

She was hard put to it to obey him and did it with tears. He knew her cousin Sophie, he liked her, she suggested, and they had all been great friends together at Christmas-time. Well, Sophie had made a great mess of things and nobody could deny it. Surely, it was all very terrible, especially

after that dreadful affair at Kensington, which had brought such disgrace upon them all.

"Not disgrace," corrected Freddy; "she just made a fool of herself, that was all. Why, she no more killed the child than I did. Just nerves and nothing more. From what I saw of her at your father's house, she was all nerves, Lucy—an excitable creature who is always imagining something and doesn't know what she is saying half the time. People know that by now, I think, and most of them are very sorry for her. They say it was all the fault of that parson fellow, who let her come to confession and then put things into her head. Of course, he thought he was doing his duty, but we don't want women confessing to men in the Church of England and we just won't have it. It's different with the Romans—their men seem to know the job better. What I want to know particularly is, what kind of a mess is the girl in now! Has she got a man after her—is it that, or do you mean something worse?"

Lucy blushed crimson. She could talk of such things to her girl friends; she had done often. But to a man!

"It's worse, Freddy," she stammered at last, "she's in love with a horrid Frenchman here and she's now at a little villa at St. Cloud—stopping with him. It's true, upon my word."

The young soldier whistled—a Victorian response conveying diverse emotions.

"Stopping with him! Does Lady Wharton know?"

"Of course she does. She'll do anything for that man. He's a boarder here and they say the Empress likes him. But, Freddy . . . he's already made love to one girl in the house: and she's . . . she's . . . oh, I can't tell you, I can't. It's too awful!"

Freddy Wharton, young in years, had learned some lessons already and one of them was discretion where women were concerned. He had no need to ask Lucy what she meant.

It was all too evident for that. But the gravity of the affair could not be concealed. He knew that he must act without a moment's delay.

"Don't say any more, Lucy. I know quite well what you mean. What a blackguard the fellow must be! I've a good mind to go to St. Cloud and give him a damned good hiding. Would it help, though? Sophie must be more than twenty-one and, of course, she can do what she pleases. She might tell me to mind my own business and what could I say then? It's a case for her father. He ought to be in Paris."

"I have telegraphed to him, Freddy, and had no answer. Can you understand it? Surely he can't be so cruel. Then there's daddy's old solicitor: you remember him at Quainton?"

"Of course I do. The old chap with the round shining face who looked like Mr. Pickwick. Jolly good sort, I thought he was, though he evidently likes cuddling the girls."

"He doesn't mean any harm, Freddy; it's just his good nature. What I can't understand is why he hasn't answered my telegram——"

"Perhaps he's never got it. I saw his name the other day on that great poisoning case at Rugby. Fine job they say he made of it. If he's doing that, he might have missed your cable. The best thing is for me to see this fellow what's his name."

"Albert de Joinville, he's one of the Emperor's aides-de-camp——"

"Well, I'll see him and ask him what the devil he means. Of course he'll challenge me to a duel. They always do, and the proper answer is a couple of black eyes to be paid for on delivery. Do you think perhaps, Lucy, that I could have a little chat to your Spanish friend first? You see, I should like to know as much as I can about it before butting in. I'm sure she'd see me if you asked her."

"She's a terribly timid little thing, Freddy. I'll try, of course—wait here until I go and find her. She was in her bedroom half an hour ago"—and upon the words, she ran upstairs, excited naturally by all that was happening and, perhaps, a little in a flutter because this masterly young soldier had seemed to like her so much more than he had done at Christmas-time.

Carmenita, it appeared, was not in her room. She was not in the house, moreover. Alphonsine, the maid, could only say that Mademoiselle's brother had called for her some twenty minutes previously and they had left the house together to go, as she supposed, for a little "promenade" to the shops. The news was both good and bad; and while Lucy was pleased by it, Freddy Wharton shrugged his broad shoulders when he heard it.

"If it is really her brother, there'll be the devil of a row, Lucy," he surmised; "these Spaniards are a hot-blooded lot. They kill first and argue about it afterwards. Anyway, that takes the responsibility off our shoulders and we can leave it to them. I must have time to think what I am to do. You go back to London with me, of course. I shall take you straight to Wichfield Castle and tell your people what's happened. They'll say that the old lawyer man is really responsible. He must have known where the regiment was and how to get at me. Why didn't he ask me about the old woman? I'd have told him something, you may be sure."

Lucy was convinced that he would. It was astonishing how all her trouble seemed lifted by the coming of this swift-thinking fellow, Freddy, first-rate soldier and capital fellow as all his brother officers would declare. She was in a new world already; and when he invited her to go for a walk with him and to arrange their plans as they wanted, she could have danced for joy. That sunny day in Paris. How kind it was to them!

To be sure, it was a very different Paris from the city she came to know in after years. The Champs Élysées was upon the borders of an open country and the Bois de Boulogne could still show stately trees, the sentinels of romance through the centuries.

In the city itself were to be found some suggestions of the ancient ways; manners which were engaging and dresses which women might call dreams. There were carriages spoiled only in English eyes by the grotesque liveries of the coachmen who drove them—fiacres by the hundred and "cochers" whose hats were of rainbow hues, pink and brown and yellow and green and all suggesting carnival and the frivolity of the nation. Such shops too, with diamonds as big as marbles and amazing pearls and the great emeralds which the Empress favoured, and all those riches which Englishmen then could purchase since America was still almost an unknown quantity to those happy people.

Freddy Wharton delighted in all this, though he had not much money to spare and the Carabineers were an expensive lot to live among.

Several pretty trinkets were in Lucy's possession before they returned to the Hôtel Condé—but what she treasured more was Freddy's obvious and growing admiration for her —the way he looked at her and pressed her hand and told her "this" or "that" matched her beautiful eyes and that roses were a necessary adjunct to a skin so white and perfect.

"I believe he's going to fall in love with me," she thought, while he, on his part, was asking himself why at Christmas-time he had not realized how pretty she really was.

"A perfect beauty," he concluded, and then reflected that it must have been the artfulness of that little devil Sophie Fordacre which had prevented him from understanding. That woman would unfrock an archbishop. Yes, it was she who had befooled him.

They walked thus for an hour: but at one o'clock they were back at the Hôtel Condé where Lucy insisted that Freddy must breakfast. To their astonishment and somewhat to their displeasure they found the old woman, Lady Wharton, already returned from St. Cloud and so pleased to see her "dear nephew" that she turned quite green when she beheld him. The game was up, then. She could have slapped the young soldier's face in her vexation.

"Freddy, my dear boy, is it really you? And what are *you* doing in Paris, then?"

"My dear aunt, you know perfectly well without asking me. I have come to take Miss Lucy Blake back to her people in Warwickshire——"

"Take her back—you? Have they sent you, then? Do you bring a letter to me?"

"Oh, no, dear aunt, I bring myself. If you are the clever woman I believe you to be, you will ask no questions and none will be asked you. To-morrow morning Lucy Blake returns to London by the nine o'clock train. You will be good enough to have her luggage ready and to help her as much as possible. The rest I will do——"

"You!"—the old woman almost screamed when she uttered the words—"Have you gone mad, then? Trust one of my charges to a man who is not even a relative and brings no authority from anybody. Indeed, I will do nothing of the kind."

"Ah," rejoined Freddy, almost with a smile, "but I think that you will, my dear aunt. You see, I am calling at the Embassy this afternoon and my friend Lord St. Albans there seems to take a particular interest in you. But don't let's talk about it. You have a little while to think it all over and as I don't want my presence here to kill you with joy, I am now going to the Hôtel Meurice to lunch. But I shall return, auntie—at six o'clock this afternoon. I shall come back for your answer, and if"—here his manner changed

instantly to one of savagery and menace—"if you still refuse me, look out for yourself, by God."

He went off upon this affable promise and Edith Wharton immediately fell to tears and to bitter reproaches.

It was all Lucy's doing, of course.

A liar, she called her, a dreadful little hypocrite and a mischief maker. The idea of anybody making a fuss because she had allowed Sophie Fordacre to spend an occasional week at her villa at St. Cloud! Was she not herself nearly always there; or, in her absence, did not her old maid Sara insist upon a propriety which would have satisfied even the Pope?

As to the Vicomte de Joinville . . . well, he had come to the villa like all her other friends: but what of that? Was he to be banished because she had made a martyr of herself and taken into her house a wicked young woman whom nobody in England would shelter, so terrible had been the scandal about her. Sophie Fordacre, indeed! A pretty thing if her morals mattered. Why, she had made love to every young man who came near the place from the very day she entered Paris.

All this and more Lucy had to hear patiently during that long afternoon.

Vaguely she understood that some kind of a message had been sent to St. Cloud and that Sophie was returning to the Hôtel Condé. In that case they might go to London together on the following morning and she would suffer no more anxiety on her cousin's account. The thought pleased her and she was almost counting the minutes until her cousin would return, when, in the streets without, the *crieurs* were shouting the story of a terrible crime and the papers they carried were telling the people that Albert, Vicomte de Joinville had been shot dead at the door of the Café Anglais by a young Spanish soldier, who was in custody.

CHAPTER XIV

GOOD-BYE TO PARIS

Two men met in the vestibule of the Hôtel Condé that night, and while they waited for their ring to be answered they recognized each other and shook hands cordially.

"Why, it's Mr. Wharton, surely? We met at Quainton at Christmas. I'm Hart-Brown the solicitor—you'll remember me?"

"Remember you. Why, who could forget you, sir? You put all the fireworks into the party. Oh, I remember you perfectly and of all the men in the country you are the one I wanted to see most to-day."

"Good, we'll talk about it. I'm over here because my little ward thinks there's something wrong with the place. She's a relative of yours, this Lady Wharton? Yes, I know that, and it was because of it I sent the girls here. Surely there's nothing very much amiss—but we'll see. A devil of a time they're keeping us at this door, to be sure. Must be all asleep, I should think."

They were not asleep, as a matter of fact, but running to and fro like frightened rabbits to assuage, if that were possible, the grief and the hysterics of a wild old woman who saw ruin staring her in the face and expected every minute that the police would knock at her door. Edith Wharton's ship was on the shoals at last. All the scheming, the debauchery, the blackmail of recent years was over and done with. The gutter was the refuge for such a woman, and thither must she go.

So it was not a servant but Lucy herself who opened the door at last to the two friends who had come to succour her. A cry of real gladness escaped her lips when she saw "Uncle Philip," as she had come to call him; and she threw herself into his arms without any ceremony whatsoever.

"Oh, Philip, Philip, how glad I am to see you! Oh, it's been awful here. Carmenita's brother has come and—oh, I don't know, I don't know—but something terrible has happened and Sophie's been sent for and Lady Wharton's gone mad and, oh, Philip, what shall we do?"—a wild outburst in which both tears and gladness figured, and such a clinging to that stout old pillar of a man that he lost his spectacles in the mêlée and his old silk hat went rolling on the flags of the long vestibule.

"Come, come, my dear," he said with his old kindly smile, "things can't be as bad as that—where is Lady Wharton? This gentleman and I will go and see her at once. Now don't you be frightening yourself. You've done what was right and proper and nobody's going to hurt you;" and turning to the young soldier, he appealed to him as one who should say, "now, what on earth is it all about and why is this old woman howling so?"

Wharton took him into the little salon on the right-hand side of the vestibule and, bidding Lucy wait for them a moment, he tried to tell him the essentials of a story which clearly had become a drama.

"There's a girl here, Carmenita, a Spaniard—Lucy's told you about her, perhaps. She's fallen for the man Albert de Joinville, who's now making love to Sophie Fordacre. Carmenita's going to have a child, they say, and her brother's been told about it. If he's come to Paris—a hot-blooded Spaniard—I expect things have happened. He may have killed the man, and by God, if he has, we're in for a pretty scandal. There's only one thing to do, sir, in that case: and that's to get these girls back to England without losing

an hour. Why, a French *procureur* would lead them the devil's own dance and the English papers be full of the scandal. Get 'em out and ask nobody, that's my advice."

In his turn, Philip remembered that there was a night train from the Gare du Nord and that it might easily be caught.

"You can get that, anyway," he said; "you shall take Lucy while I look after the other. Of course you are right. There must be no scandal. The girls have got nothing to do with it—nothing at all. We'll get 'em back to England, and keep 'em there. By God, no more French education for me, and as for this old woman upstairs—but I beg your pardon. She's your aunt, isn't she?"

"She is, I am sorry to say . . . and a more damnably wicked old woman you will not easily find. I am going upstairs to tell her so now."

"No, no, my boy, prudence, prudence. We'll see her together. Firmness, but no scenes. She's quite capable of informing the police what we are up to, and that would be the devil. Let me talk: it's my business."

They went upstairs to the old woman's room, the maid Alphonsine having prepared the way; and they left little Lucy curled up on the mat outside, vainly straining her ears for some news of that encounter and praying between-whiles that angels from heaven would waft her away from Paris and that Freddy Wharton might discover somewhere a handy pair of wings to help him upon a similar journey. Such fragments of talk as she overheard embraced such words as "monstrous, criminal, house of ill-fame, damages and departure." Philip in his cold, serious way was telling Edith, Lady Wharton, just what he thought of her and she, for her part, was alternately screeching and praying. A shocking spectacle, truly, but Lucy could only imagine it.

The hag lay upon a tousled bed, her iron-grey hair entangled about her shrunken face and her eyes staring wildly

from a thin emaciated face, which already suggested the place of the skull and the charnel house.

Dirty hands beat a tattoo upon a counterpane, far from clean; while upon her bony fingers were many rings of emeralds, of diamonds and of sapphires.

Tears of hate, rage and shame trickled upon her rouge and formed there an ugly paste as though they were mixed in a pot and the pestle lacking. Thus lying, she moaned or shrieked—or sat up in bed to point a finger menacingly at some phantom figure of her fate which denounced her.

"He came here because the girl lied to him—I tell you she did. She's no more going to have a baby than I am. It was one of her lies to hold Albert. Look at her face and read what a liar she is. Just because she wanted him, she's done her best to ruin us all. Sophie—I'll swear that's a good girl—good—good. Wasn't I at St. Cloud all the time? Did you send the children to me to lock them up in a convent? Pretty nuns they would have made, ogling every man they saw. I say I'm innocent. I will shriek it from the house-tops. I'm a poor old woman against whom all the world has turned. Into hell with them all. What do I care? Who can punish me? Who? Who?"

To such hysteria the men listened with what patience they could. Philip, as a lawyer, was used to scenes: young Wharton as a handsome soldier had seen much of women and thought that he understood their moods. "She's been drinking brandy," he whispered to Philip. "That medicine certainly does not mend matters."

"Come, come," said Philip in his best professional manner, "it's no good carrying on like this. You must pull yourself together and do something. Send for a what-do-you-call-him, an *avoué*—lawyer man—isn't that it? Your best chance, my good woman, is to help me to get the girls out of Paris without loss of time. If you don't, the police will be cross-examining them and there will be the devil to

pay. Get 'em away, and then it's merely an affair between the two men. I shall send Lucy back to England with your nephew and look after the other one myself. But there's no time to lose, and you'd better get out of that bed and be doing something and pretty quick about it——"

She promised that she would do so, the tears ceasing and some self-control returning, inspired by the lawyer's calm authority and imperious manner.

Lucy, being summoned, was sent off to get together what clothes she could and to prepare for the journey; and when Freddy Wharton had driven off with her to the Gare du Nord, Philip breathed again and sat down to the quite excellent dinner which an unshaken cook had prepared for the household—now one of precisely three people, since most of the "boarders" had forsaken the Hôtel Condé at the first rumours of tragedy, and only the old Abbé Henry remained in his frowsy and book-laden room in the upper story. Scandal mattered nothing to him, he had been in too many; and he reflected that this, the latest, might help considerably the sale of this new novel "Incontinence," then about to be published.

Sophie returned from St. Cloud just as the clocks were striking eleven. She was very white and silent, and seemed wholly unable to understand why she had been sent for, or what really had happened. Characteristically enough, she made no attempt to conceal anything from Philip, and was overwhelmingly candid with him as to her relations with Albert de Joinville.

Yes, he certainly had been her lover, if that was the word. She did not think it was a sin since he had promised to marry her, and obviously was in a position to do so. As to little Carmenita, she refused to believe a word of the tale. That designing person had been running after Albert for a year or more; and if anything had happened, it certainly was her fault.

"She wanted him so badly, Philip—she was determined to have him. Now that she sees she can't get him, she has sent for her brother and I suppose there has been a pretty row."

"Row, my dear, row—haven't you heard?"

"I've only heard what the maid Emilie has told me. Lady Wharton sent her down to St. Cloud to fetch me, and we just caught the last train back to Paris. All I know about it is that a strange man—they thought he was an Italian, but of course he is a Spaniard—had been asking at the villa if the Count was there, and appeared to be very disappointed when he could not find him. I was to go back at once. Now I find you here and I am awfully glad. Oh, Philip, why did you send me to Paris, among all these dreadful people . . . after what had happened in England? How unkind of you, Philip, but I suppose you didn't know. Oh, you never could have or you wouldn't have done it, now would you, Philip dear?"

Philip was greatly moved. Here was the old Sophie speaking—the irresistible, impulsive little darling of a girl whom he would have married twenty times over if some stern code of his professional duty had not seemed to forbid him. And now she could tell him, almost without a blush, that some other man had wronged her; while it was evident that the tragic happening in Paris was still unknown to her. Philip felt wholly at a loss when facing such a crisis; nevertheless he was a lawyer and his first thought was of a subterfuge.

"Of course, Sophie, I wouldn't have sent you here if I had known what the place was like. The Whartons bear a great name in England, and the husband of this old woman was a soldier and a K.C.B. Whom can you trust if not the wife of a man like that? Money, of course, my dear, just money which causes so much mischief in the world—nothing but money. Well, we're in for it and it can't be helped. These

two men have met and apparently there has been the devil of a row. They say that Albert has been shot."

Sophie went as white as alabaster at this.

"Albert . . . shot! Oh, Philip, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying what they're all saying upstairs. There mayn't be a word of truth in it. There usually isn't when women begin to talk. What concerns us is not whether two foreigners have been cutting each other up, but whether we can get out of this city before anybody wants to know what we know. Your luggage is packed, I suppose, and that's standing out in the hall. Well, I'm going straight off with you to a little English hotel I know not far from the big boulevard, and we're going to stop there until the morning. At nine o'clock we shall be at the Gare du Nord and by six to-morrow night we shall be, with any luck, on the platform at Charing Cross and ready for a little dinner at Bond's Hotel. Now get one of the people here to send for a cab and leave the rest to me. It isn't the time for talk, my dear, God knows."

It certainly was not.

The diminutive page-boy, who was sent out for a cab, took half an hour to find one, and old Lady Wharton was only restrained by two stout maids from Normandy from making a personal attack on the lawyer when he took Sophie from the house.

Screeches, threats, imprecations followed Philip and Sophie as they walked down the tiled path to the famous bronze gates, which, appropriately enough, had been the pride of the famous courtesan who once occupied that now discredited mansion. They could still hear the shrill voice of the baffled hag as they entered the shabby cab and set off at a laborious jog-trot down the ill-lighted avenue.

"The last time we shall have the pleasure of hearing those dulcet tones," observed Philip, now driven to the sarcasm of anger . . . and upon that he spoke no other word

until the hotel received them and they knew that they had travelled the first stage upon the road to safety.

"I left no address but my office in Birmingham," said Philip, as they went upstairs to their rooms; "the woman will never guess we are here, and I don't suppose the authorities will trouble overmuch about us. It is a quarrel between two men about a woman and we can hardly help them."

Sophie stopped dead upon the landing at this and shading her candle with a trembling hand, she asked Philip to tell her the truth.

"Philip, please be frank with me. Is Albert dead?"

"My dear, they say so——"

She did not speak, but followed the chambermaid into the dirty little bedroom where she was to sleep that night, and she locked the door that none might come to her.

It would be idle to say that there were not moments when, looking out from her window, down upon the throngs still moving in the Boulevard des Italians, she had the impulse to throw herself headlong to the pavement below and there to end for ever a life which Fate had blasted so utterly, and the uttermost misfortune had pursued.

From this some voice of an early faith alone restrained her. She was afraid to die and lived because she was afraid.

There was no sleep for Sophie Fordacre that night.

In her ears, the words "to-morrow and to-morrow" echoed menacingly. What in God's name had the future for her now? Where was she to live and in what circumstances? Would England harbour her or must she become for ever an exile from the homeland? Marriage and even love, both might be denied her if this story of her mad escapade in Paris leaked out.

How blind she had been not to see that Albert de Joinville had been merely fooling her as he had fooled so many women if all report of him were true. Of course, he had

never loved her! Such men do not love and are, in their turn, hated by their victims. This thought was helped by her Irish temperament. She knew that she would hate Albert de Joinville to the end of her days—hate him to the point of desiring and accomplishing his death if that could be. The evil in her predominated in her as it had done on that terrible day in the garden at Kensington. Yet she had a capacity for goodness which no man yet had fathomed. This poor little Sophie whom Destiny willed to suffer!

At the breaking of the dawn, her desire to escape from France became almost a mania, and she was up and dressed when the old men were sweeping the boulevard and the old women were on their way to Mass.

Until this time she had paid little attention to Philip's anxiety as to their position in the eyes of the French law, but it was clear to her now and she shared it to the full.

If they were stopped, questioned, even carried to prison! Such things were done to foreigners who were in trouble abroad and might be done to them. The mere possibility could set her trembling. Why did Philip not get up at once? Why did he delay an instant?

Here was a quite unnecessary reflection upon a wise man's prudence. Philip himself knocked upon the door of her room at a quarter-past seven o'clock to ask her if everything were ready and if they had yet brought her the *petit déjeuner*.

"You must try to eat something," he insisted, "for it's a long journey. I've ordered two eggs *à la coque* as they call 'em, and you must drink plenty of hot coffee. Your trunks haven't been opened, I see! Well, that's a good thing, and we can be off quickly. Luckily I thought of this place, my dear. If I hadn't, a *procureur du roi* or some other fellow might have spent the day asking you questions. When we are in England, he may ask them and be damned. I hate Frenchmen, and I shan't forget to tell 'em so. Let me once

get out on the platform at Dover and all the gendarmes in France won't get me back again."

Here was the Palmerston spirit and the old man rejoiced in it. Touch an Englishman and the cannon would go off. But in France, insult, abuse, arrogance before the weapon could be loaded. It was the gospel of the age and time alone changed it in the name of fraternity.

Happily, gunpowder did not befoul this beautiful day of an early spring.

No *agents de police* appeared in the hall of the little hotel; no questions were asked; no suspicions raised. At eight o'clock precisely, a cab came into the ancient courtyard and Sophie's luggage was loaded on to it. They were at the Gare du Nord half an hour later, and at one o'clock of the day exactly they stepped on board the miserable little paddle-boat, the *Victoria*, and watched the great grey shapes of Blanc and Gris Nez grow blurred in the mists. An English boat and an English skipper. "To hell with Paris now," exclaimed Philip with vehemence. His thoughts henceforth were all for Sophie and her future. What was he to do for her? Whither take her?

We shall not blame him if for one mad instant the remembrance came to him that she was alone in the world and that possibly he might take her for the asking.

That thought he put from him sternly.

CHAPTER XV

SOPHIE'S RESOLUTION

THERE was a brisk fire in the comfortable sitting-room at Bond's Hotel when Philip and Sophie arrived there that night at a quarter-past seven; and Freddy Wharton and Lucy were already installed before it, so close together that in other circumstances their attitude would have moved the lawyer to a little jocularity.

As it was, he merely greeted them warmly and was glad to see that the cousins kissed each other with some show of real affection and that Lucy evidently wished to act the part of the "little mother" and to do it quite earnestly. Naturally Philip bethought him at an early moment of his supper—and it being, as he said, just like a birthday party, he ordered champagne and lobsters without hesitation.

"We're away, children, and devilish lucky to be away. We'll drink a toast to that and forget we've been hungry before we talk about anything else. Now let's wash ourselves and then we can fall in. By the Lord, Harry, I'm as black as a sweep and so is Sophie. It's that damned French coal which no Christian country would use. Thank God, we're all in clean England again!"

His mood was infectious and relieved the strain of it all. A true son of John Bull, he did not mind washing in a basin about as big as a pudding dish nor bathing in a glorified tin-can about one day in seven—but soap, none the less, was a national boast, and faith in an Englishman's love of it, an indispensable article of an Englishman's creed. Thus, the

face of Philip Hart-Brown shone like a rosy apple when at length he sat down, and Sophie's eyes were no longer as black as sloes.

They talked of many things—but chiefly of the tragedy from which they had fled. The details of it as cabled from Paris were certainly dramatic enough and of Albert de Joinville's death there seemed no doubt whatever. As, however, he had first struck the Spaniard with a sword-stick he always carried and then threatened the man with the actual blade, the possibilities of the defence seemed excellent and Philip had no doubt of an acquittal.

"No French jury condemns a brother," he affirmed; "the judge will cry and the jury will cry and twenty men will come forward and offer to marry the little lady who has been the cause of it all. The main thing is, children, that we are out of it and not very likely to put our heads into that hornets' nest again. The person who is going to suffer is that damnable old woman—begging your pardon, Wharton, for speaking like that of your aunt."

"Oh, say what you like about *her*," ejaculated Freddy with emphasis, "she's been the skeleton in our family cupboard for the last twenty years. How my uncle stood it all, nobody knows! She had enough lovers to make a chorus at the opera and she beggared the old man by her extravagances. Gamble! My word, you should hear the stories about her play at Baden when that man Blanc, who's now opening a gambling hell at Monte Carlo, ran the show. She must have lost two fortunes there . . . and the third went to young men when she could no longer hold them any other way."

"She'll go to the devil now, that's certain," said Philip; "God send that she doesn't come to this country."

Sophie was quite terrified by that thought.

"Oh," she cried, "if she does—if she comes and finds me out!"

"She'll not do that, my dear. Trust old Philip for that. We'll discover some place to put you away safely and if that lady appears, the law may have something to say to her."

"She'll blackmail the family—that's what she'll do," suggested Freddy with a rueful air . . . he knew his dear aunt so well and remembered the begging letters she wrote with such frequency.

Philip remained unconcerned at this possibility, but the problem of Sophie and her future was not so easy.

There was her father, Greville Fordacre, to be considered and the very first business on the following morning was to take a hansom cab and go over to Kensington to discuss the matter. Sympathy he had not looked for, but such anger and such utter indifference as Fordacre now showed towards his unhappy daughter he certainly had not expected.

"My mind is absolutely made up," said that elegant prig, "and my wife is even more determined. We have washed our hands of the girl, and if we can help it, we will never see her again. The affair of which you tell me but confirms my own judgment. It was she who killed my dear son and no other. All this talk about uncontrollable impulse and suppressed hysteria may be good enough for the doctors and lawyers—nothing personal Brown, nothing personal—but it's not good enough for me. She contrived the boy's death and God helping me I have done with her. She has money, she has friends. Let her live her own life, then, and permit me to forget that she exists. Is she not of age, I would ask you—and has she any claim upon me whatsoever? I answer that she has none, and if she ever dares to darken my doors, I will fling her into the gutter as though she were the common prostitute she threatens to become."

Philip perceived that there was nothing to be got by further argument with such a man, and he hurried back to Albemarle Street to tell Sophie as much.

"The fellow's a beauty," he said to himself with his

homely "Brummagem" ideas; and he left it at that. In the same mood, he resolved that he would try the experiment of being not only Sophie's friend but her guide and philosopher. Her father had made a pretty mess of it and that well-meaning parson, Arthur St. Just, had not done much better. Let a plain-spoken lawyer, then, try and see what he could do.

It was a beautiful spring morning, and hansom cabs not then being permitted in Hyde Park, Philip walked back to Albemarle Street and had a look at the riders in Rotten Row as he went. The red may was out and the chestnuts almost at the zenith of their blooming. A vigorous air from the east set everybody walking briskly, while even fat men on beautiful horses bumped about in canters as though forgetful of their livers. All wore shining silk hats and dark trousers strapped under their boots; while women in the wide splendour of encircling crinolines and poke bonnets watched their heroes from the bank of the Achilles statue, and other beauties exchanged furtive glances with young officers of the Guards with whom they hoped to dance that night.

Park Lane was a flower-bedecked lane at that time and half the riches of the world were supposed to be housed in that most dignified quarter of Mayfair.

You could not walk a hundred yards in the neighbourhood of Grosvenor Square without observing my Lord Tomnoddy, his sisters or his aunts; and many miles of red carpet upon front-door steps signified that the London season was then at its height and would continue in that proud position until Goodwood sounded its knell.

Philip Hart-Brown liked to think that he moved amidst this magnificence. These people, certainly, could teach "Brum" a thing or two, "but it's we who make the money for them," the good fellow argued sententiously.

The foundries, the steel mills, the iron, the brass, even the idols which the poor heathen worshipped, so profitably for Birmingham, these were the true wealth of Britain,

enabling the rich to eat and drink without any thought of dying on the morrow and the poor to submit with resignation to the glory of their "betters."

The thought gave lightness even to the step of a fat man; and Philip had beads of honest perspiration on his massive forehead when he reached Bond's Hotel and found Sophie alone in the little sitting-room, waiting anxiously for his news from Kensington.

Perhaps his face told her that it was not good news and for that she was not sorry. Never again did she wish to see that father who had so slighted, nor the stepmother who had so insulted, her. Philip's very gesture implied that neither of these misfortunes was likely to overtake her.

"Just as I thought, my dear. Your father won't help us and we shall have to help ourselves. It's better to know the worst if it is the worst, and we can now begin to think for ourselves."

"What did he say, Philip? What did you tell him? Not about Albert, surely. You didn't say anything about that?"

"I said enough to prevent him going over to Paris and trying to find out the rest for himself. He's the man to do it if I hadn't—all curiosity and whispers, my dear . . . and we don't want either. I said that the man, Albert, had been making love to you, but how far you'd gone I didn't say. The fact is he wasn't interested—seemed afraid you were wanting to come back and, just as plainly, didn't mean to have you."

"Thank heaven for that, Philip. I'd sooner throw myself out of the window than go back to that house and that woman. There's nothing left now but to try and forget them all and that's what I mean to do just as soon as I can. Oh, Philip, you will look after me; you will be my friend won't you, dear Philip? I have nobody else in all the world now. You know that, Philip, don't you?"

The good fellow liked these words and he kissed and hugged Sophie heartily, taking her on his knee and making much of her.

"Of course I know, my little darling. Hasn't old Philip always been your friend and has anything happened to change him? No, no, he'll stand by you. He'll see nobody harms you . . . you can count on him, my dear, whoever else fails you."

He fell to talking of her future and of what he proposed to her; while she listened as one in a dream, her thoughts often back to the woods of Longchamp, her vision that of the dead man who had wronged her. Already these things seemed of some remote past when she had lived in a different world and this England and its troubles had been forgotten. Now she had but one hope in life—and he a lawyer, who had philandered with pretty women almost since the day he left school.

"Philip," she asked him presently, but with little anxiety in her tone, "I have my own money, haven't I, Philip? How much is it really, dear?"

"It's about five hundred a year, Sophie. Your mother left you ten thousand pounds in the Funds but the interest accumulated while you were a minor and now you have just about five hundred. A woman can live very well on that, you know. Some day you'll be getting a husband and he won't object if you've got a little money. They never do, Sophie."

"Oh, no, Philip," she protested, "I shall never marry now. I don't mean to give any man the chance of discovering things about me afterwards and then leading me a dreadful life. I shall live and die an old maid . . . I told Albert de Joinville so when he offered to marry me. You know I could have married him, Philip."

"I'm glad you didn't, Sophie. There'd have been just the same trouble and you in the thick of it. As it is, we may

never hear another word of it. You must live quietly for a few months here and then we can make plans again. What would you say if I took the Brook Farm . . . you remember it, five miles from Quainton on the Kidderminster Road? you could set up housekeeping there. I could always come over on the Saturdays, and sometimes we might run up to this old city together and see what's going on at the theatres. You wouldn't have any neighbours at the farm and nobody to be looking over your garden wall. It's the best thing I can think of, Sophie, and the safest. You must tell me in a day or two just what you think of it."

It was not a gay prospect and Sophie might have been forgiven if she had thought little of it. For the moment, however, the *wanderlust* in her was dead or sleeping and the fear of foreigners and their ways very much alive. She accepted the idea of the farm, therefore, without demur and proceeded to astonish Philip by some news of her own which was welcome if not very surprising.

"Lucy's engaged," she exclaimed in an outburst that was inconsequent; "she and Freddy have gone out to buy the ring. We shall have a marriage in the family and I shan't be there. Dear little kid—she isn't seventeen until her next birthday and it's awfully young—but Freddy's all right, I'm sure of that. He'll make her a jolly good husband . . . that is, if his papa consents. They say he's awfully rich, Philip—I hope it's true."

Philip greeted the intimation with a whistle, for shrewd man as he was, this turn of affairs certainly surprised him.

"Oh, they're rich enough—Wharton and James in Lombard Street, shipbrokers. Did she tell you that, or did he?"

"Both of them. They're love birds without a cage. She'll be frightfully upset if papa says 'No'——"

"Or, if I say it"—and he laughed. "I'm her guardian, you know, and the Court of Chancery has what little money

she's got. It wouldn't be a bad thing for that young man to marry into the Wichfield family, would it, though? And it would save a bit of trouble, too. By Jove, Sophie, I like to hear it . . . damned if I don't take you both out and buy you a diamond bracelet apiece just to celebrate our home-coming. Engaged to Freddy Wharton. My word, that is news!"

He kept his promise and the jewels glittered on two pretty arms when they sat down to dinner that night. Both the men were elated, and even Sophie forgot the doubt about her future. After all, a woman with five hundred a year is not alone in the world . . . and even the White Knight may be unable to pay for his golden armour. As to Philip, he felt paternal as he had never felt before.

Perhaps it was lucky for his peace of mind that the little lady in the shoe shop had moved on to another establishment and that he had mislaid her address.

CHAPTER XVI

WEDDING BELLS—AND OTHERS

FREDDY and Lucy were married at the end of July. His regiment was going abroad—to Ireland for a season, and then to India, where the disasters of the great Mutiny were still on every tongue. Lady Wichfield, suddenly interested in this pretty orphan niece of hers, saw to it that the child was married worthily, and the drizzling, grizzling Earl actually gave her ten thousand pounds as a wedding-present. As the miserable man did not draw more than two hundred thousand pounds a year from his collieries and his properties, the sacrifice must have added something to his habitual sorrow.

Sophie was at the wedding, far back in the shadows of the beautiful cathedral, and her heart beat a little faster when she saw Father Arthur among the number of the priests gathered about that splendid altar and remembered the night when she had crept into the shadows of his own little church and had confessed to him.

How gentle he had been; how soft his voice; how kind his very touch! Christ Himself might have been speaking the words he uttered. What would such a saint say to her now! She knew that she would never dare to confess to him again, and her soul trembled at the thought. Why were there not such men to stand by every woman's side when she was tempted? How different it would be if there were.

There were many carriages for the wedding and the Earl's great barouche appeared with the four black horses and the postilions in blue and silver.

Brother officers from the Carabineers came in jocund mood and a troop of those famous heavy Dragoons in their famous blue tunics held swords above the heads of the "happy pair" and cheered them lustily afterwards.

Freddy was a popular young officer and had been made a captain this summer. His colonel was by no means displeased that he should marry the niece of so great a county gun as the Earl of Wichfield; while the county people generally, who had idolized John Blake, were very well satisfied with the match.

So Lucy was duly sworn in, as one of the local magistrates declared, to love, honour and obey Frederick Mentmore Wharton, and he in turn undertook, though not in so many words, to spend her ten thousand pounds (and any other money Philip Hart-Brown could save from the wreck of her father's fortune), to the best advantage and to their mutual comfort. This done, the cheers rang out and off went the happy pair, to the ringing of bells and the complete satisfaction of the loyal citizens, most of whom were unhappily married themselves, and so rejoiced to see another couple led to the slaughter.

The breakfast was given in the great banqueting hall of the Castle and was a splendid affair. Despite the Earl's mild suggestion that "ball supper" champagne would be good enough, the Countess stoutly declared that she would have only the best and plenty of it. Even Philip Hart-Brown, to whom champagne was usually poison, drank so much of that excellent wine that he was with difficulty restrained from singing a hunting song (totally inappropriate to the occasion and anathema to bishops); while as for the mayor and the aldermen honoured by invitation, they scattered "aitches" in lieu of golden sovereigns and roundly declared the Earl to be the most generous man in England.

So came the cutting of the immense cake, the swift change of raiment and the "going away."

Lucy looked astonishingly pretty in her simple travelling dress and poke bonnet, and all the people who watched her go declared that she had the face of an angel and the ways of a mere child.

The men, in their turn, remembered that Freddy would have (as old Squire Western said of Tom Jones) the tousling of her and they envied the lucky dog. Happily, her own attitude was one of complete content. She laughed with everybody and at everything, kissed all and sundry who took advantage of her mental elation and (to the astonishment of the wizened virgins present) did not shed a tear.

"A hardened hussy," murmured one of these ladies, "I should have cried like a child." Upon which a man nearby observed to his neighbour: "Not like a child but *for* one."

Philip Hart-Brown waited until the happy pair had left and then went down to the Red Lion Hotel to discover Sophie.

She was glad enough to see him, for she had not dared to show herself openly as there were so many people she had known quite well before the sad affair at Kensington. Philip had promised her to take her back to his own house in Birmingham that night, and there to hear how she liked the Brook Farm and if she really meant to settle down there as she had promised him to do. With this intention they caught the five o'clock train from Wichfield, and by seven o'clock were sitting down in the lawyer's spacious dining-room at Edgbaston and drinking some exceedingly fine hock, which was much better for the poor man than champagne and a fine prelude to the '34 port he consumed so generously afterwards.

Sophie never quite understood Philip's ideas about women and she was always asking herself why he had never taken a wife.

"How can you live alone in this great house?" she asked, when they were at last alone, and he was insisting upon her

drinking "just one glass" of his stimulating port, "you must feel awfully lonely, Philip. Don't you ever see any ghosts?"

He laughed—a fat man's laugh.

"Ghosts of dead wives. No, my dear, I never had any and so they don't haunt me. The place is well enough, and if it's rather big for me there are always plenty of friends to come along when Warwick or Leamington is racing, or Sims Reeves singing at the Festival. I had a dozen politicians in the house the last time John Bright spoke on peace, and finely they cackled. I'm away so much, here and there, hanging one man and keeping another from the scaffold, that really any house would do for me. But my father and mother lived and died here, and in a way the place is sacred. Perhaps some day, when people have forgotten all about things, you'll come to keep house for me. Lucy's promised to look her old lawyer up when she comes back from her honeymoon—you'll have to be there to help me to keep the young couple in order."

Sophie laughed at that.

"They've gone to Scarborough, haven't they, Philip? I thought he had to rejoin his regiment immediately the honeymoon was over."

"Nobody ever rejoins the Carabineers, my dear, unless he wants to. They're a jolly lot, and when they do their soldiering, the Lord only knows. Bill Buller used to tell me that on Sunday mornings, when they were at Canterbury, the sergeant would wake him regularly, and ask if there should be a church parade or not. "Do you see a cloud in the sky, sergeant?" Bill would ask. "There's one about as big as your hand, sorr," the sergeant would say. "Then no parade this morning, sergeant," Bill would reply—and no parade there was for sure.

"But Freddy will have to go to Ireland sooner or later."

"Of course he will, more's the pity. If Lucy were here,

she could be at the farm with you sometimes. A bit dull I expect you're finding it, aren't you, my dear. Don't be frightened to tell old Philip. You know how much he wants to make you happy."

Sophie knew that, indeed. She knew also that if the dear fellow had been twenty years younger, he wouldn't have hesitated to make love to her.

"It is a bit dull, Philip, though it's comfortable enough. The flower garden is simply beautiful, I have never seen such roses. But, then, can one talk to roses? The only people who have come to see me are the Pearmans, and he holds his hat between his knees while he speaks and his dreams are of cows. I believe Father Arthur called twice, but I don't want to see him and so Patrick said 'I was out, by Jasus.' I love Patrick and his wife, and you couldn't have sent a better pair to look after me. He says that young Pearman is in love with me and has gone and bought himself a new pair of trousers on the strength of it. He lurks about the farm all Saturday and Sunday, and if I go to Quainton church, he sings the hymns at me. Oh, Philip, I couldn't die milking cows: I'm sure I was never sent into the world for that!"

"Of course you weren't. I wish you'd seen Father Arthur, though. I don't like his Popery—not a bit. But the man's greater than the coat on his back, and if ever I ran against a saint in this world, it's Arthur St. Just. You should see him, Sophie—I'm sure he's your friend."

Sophie thought of it—then one of her merely "worldly" moods came to her.

"I saw him to-day, Philip. I wonder if he really approves of weddings. Of course, he'll never marry himself, and he must think the rest of us merely miserable sinners. I should just die if he knew what happened to me in Paris; and yet I'm not a bit ashamed of it. Why should I be ashamed of loving a man? The world won't let me

marry properly and thinks I ought to go into a nunnery. Well, I'm not going, and the world can think what it likes. I shall go to the Continent presently and begin my life all over again, Philip. I could never live alone in this England —as even you want me to do."

Philip sighed. He had expected something of this kind and it did not surprise him.

"You'll do little good among foreigners, Sophie . . . I don't care what the country is and who are the people. Sooner or later, an Englishman or, for that matter, an Englishwoman thinks of the homeland, and no other is any good then. You'd be dreaming of Warwickshire and its roses in twelve months' time, and God knows how you'd feel then. Stop at the farm a bit and see what you can make of it. I shall come out to you whenever I can, and you must be in Birmingham sometimes and we'll go to the theatre. Sothern's bringing a company down presently, and Matthews will be playing in the autumn. Then there's Amy Sedgwick, a wonderful actress and the only one of the lot of 'em who's been invited to Windsor Castle by the Queen. That's her virtue, I suppose. Even the bishops shake hands with her and give her their blessing. Well, well, it's an odd world and an old country lawyer can't be expected to understand it. All he can do is to take it as he finds it . . . and to remember that there is always London when life is dull. We must go to London sometimes, Sophie; what about a night at Cremorne Gardens, eh? That would show you something, I know."

Sophie's eyes sparkled at the idea, and she admitted that the music and the mysteries of Cremorne indeed would be to her liking. The thought of the dreary farm was little to her taste, and she could not forbear, when she was in her bed that night, contrasting her loneliness and isolation with the happy hours little Lucy must now be knowing. She, on the other hand, now appeared doomed to life-long

celibacy. Sensual and passionate as she was, she shrank from abandoned libertinage and all her instincts revolted against the life of the cocotte or the prostitute.

So she went back to the farm and there, to the wonder of all, she lived in seclusion for five long years.

One evening, a carriage was driven out from Birmingham and two solemn-faced men entered her little hall and were shown into the small drawing-room which overlooked her rose garden. It was an early night of summer, and all her roses were in bloom. She remembered long afterwards the warm perfume of them, the stillness of the fields and the distant echo of a railway train, far down in the valley of King's Norton. Then she heard the men speaking and they told her that Philip Hart-Brown was dead.

"Overtaken by a stroke on his way back from London —he recovered for a few hours and told us to come to you— we have learned only to-day that we carried a message to Mrs. Hart-Brown. Indeed, you have our deepest sympathy."

Sophie, very white and still, sank into a chair and for some moments she did not speak.

"Yes," she said at last, "I have been his wife for four years now"—then she fainted and the women of the house came in to her.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER XVII

JOHN BLAKE GOES TO CAMBRIDGE

JOHN BLAKE was a "fine lad" when he left Malvern College, and Lady Wichfield, now a buxom matron, expressed herself as well pleased with him.

She and her melancholy husband had paid for the best part of his education, and as his master saw that he had a flair for mathematics they decided that he had better go to Cambridge. The matter was finally clinched by John getting an open mathematical scholarship to Caius College and so bringing for the first time academic lustre upon the hitherto unlearned family of the Blakes.

He was an odd sort of boy. The Earl frankly did not know what to do with him. The army he would not enter, for he disliked the idea that somebody might kill him—though killing he could have undertaken. The Church seemed a respectable but ill-paid profession, and with the law he determined to have nothing to do, for had not the lawyers ruined his poor father—from whom he inherited but a miserable five thousand pounds when all his debts were paid. So there remained but commerce—and "commerce" was anathema at Wichfield Castle.

John resembled his dead father in many ways, but he showed no mental likeness whatever to that joyous and spiritual mother of his, Lucy Waters, who had been the very life of his boyhood and his home.

He was incredibly mean for one thing, and to meanness

he allied a cunning prudence which old John Blake most certainly would have despised.

Though attracted in a vague way by women he feared intimacy with them and shunned their delusive company.

Once, at the Castle, a pretty little French governess crept into his bedroom at midnight and told him that she loved him. John pushed her out indignantly though he was but eighteen, and he lay awake a long time speculating as to what would happen if she declared him to be the father of her child and what lawyer he would employ. But he never told anybody about it; and with some latent chivalry, he let the girl keep her place and marry a bailiff ultimately, to the great content of the parish clergy, who believed that all Frenchwomen necessarily were immoral.

Caius had been a very small college a few years previously, but they had recently built a fine new court and John's room looked over the pleasant garden before the little chapel on the one side and, upon the other, it faced a grocer's shop.

He liked that, for he was religious in a commercial kind of way; and certainly he was very fond of groceries. Most of the men studying with him were up for their medicals and many of them had bones and skulls as ornaments for their rooms which used to give John a shiver, for he hated talk of death.

A great, big, hefty fellow with tousled fair hair and Irish eyes, he could smash up a scrum at rugger with anybody, and the boating people, claiming him at once for a number five in the second boat, very quickly made a good oarsman of him. Thus he became mildly popular, and although his tutor declared a little mournfully that his learning was less profound than he had hoped, he did fairly well in his examinations and managed to retain his scholarship.

Life was much more leisurely at Cambridge in those days, and sport by no means the slavery that it has since become.

People did not go down to the river every day unless

they were in training; and when they walked out in the afternoon they wore check suits of enormous patterns and actually carried gloves.

Rich men kept horses and played polo. If you drove a tandem, a very smart thing to do, you put your leader in when you were beyond the pike at Trumpington. Otherwise a proctor was rude enough to fine you a guinea and to compel the dispersal of your stable. John Blake, however, would never have thought of an extravagance like this. He liked hunting, as did his father before him, but somebody else must mount him and pay his hunt subscription. Yet he could and did give you some quite jovial "wines" in Caius and his singing of "D'ye ken John Peel" aroused the lasting animosity of the Dean.

Then there was "Dicky" Gilbert also, that jolly soul who had been educated chiefly in Paris and was by no means a spiritual influence in John's life.

Dicky used to confess himself staggered when he learned that John was very ignorant about women, and he took an evil delight in attempting to lead this great hulk of a man into temptation.

Once he lured him up to London for the night and picked up a couple of poor tired creatures in the foyer of the old Alhambra theatre. With these they drove to the "North Bank" in St. John's Wood, then a fashionable resort for such traffickers, and dreadful champagne was served them. When, however, they were asked to pay two guineas in advance for it, John buttoned up his pocket and said that he was going home. A negro appeared and all the fighting instincts of the Blakes were aroused. John knocked the fellow through a standing mirror and both the ladies declared in a breath that its value was ten pounds. This sum not being forthcoming, one of the "beauties" ran out to fetch a policeman while the two unabashed undergraduates sought a hansom cab. "Saved our virtue anyhow," said Dicky, a

little ruefully. John thought more of having saved his money.

"Why you went along with a couple of old scrags like that I just don't know. If I wanted to make love I'd choose something decent. Now just think of that little girl we saw dancing at the Alhambra to-night! Carmen, didn't she call herself? Well, that's my style if I'm out for the night with Venus. But, of course, that sort of girl doesn't have much to do with strangers."

The idea amused Dicky very much.

"John," he said, "you ought to be put into a glass case and labelled 'green.' Why, that woman must have been thirty if she was a day. If you saw her by daylight, you'd probably call for a doctor. And I'll tell you this, my boy, if you asked her to supper, she'd come with you every day in the week. You try it next time you come to London. Send a letter round to the stage-door and say you're waiting for her."

John shook his head.

"And where should I take her if I did?"

"Oh, mighty infant. Take her to Bates' to supper . . . it's in a side street off the Strand and she'll know the way all right. Ask her and see, dear boy, ask her and see."

This happened in the Lent term and the thoughts of it stuck in John's mind and would not be obliterated. He had to pass the short Easter vac. in London since the Wichfields were away in Paris, where all the gaieties of the Second Empire were at their height and no omen of the terrible war to come yet to be discerned.

John took bachelor's apartments in Adam Street, Strand, and for three weeks led a hectic life which surprised him more than anything he had done in all his years.

The little Spanish girl, Carmen, was still dancing at the Alhambra, he discovered, and the mere sight of her awakened his amorous instincts as nothing ever had done before.

After all, why should he not ask her to supper as Dicky Gilbert had suggested. Dicky was a man of the world who knew about such things. John resolved to put it to the venture and going off to the Alhambra one night in his best dress-clothes, he had the temerity to send round a card to the stage-door by one of the stalwart chuckers-out (to whom he gave half a crown) and then to sit down boldly in the back row of the stalls to see if there were any answer.

What was his amazement when, some half an hour later, the great beliveried giant of a man returned and asked in quite a loud voice if he were Mr. Blake.

Fool, thought John, I've given her my real name; and he went hot and cold at the thought. Nevertheless, he answered the man in the affirmative, whereupon he received his card back and upon it in blurred pencil, he discovered just the two words—"Yes, eleven-thirty."

His heart beat fast at that and he hardly knew how to contain himself. She was coming to supper with him! Did she mean anything else? Dicky had said that the mere fact of her coming was enough. John hardly dared to believe it.

Of course, he was round by the stage-door at a quarter-past eleven, and equally, of course, she did not appear until nearly a quarter to twelve.

John, however, was so very pleased to see her that he actually forgot that he had kept a hansom waiting for half an hour and would have to pay for it. He found her quite a sophisticated person, dressed very quietly in an evening gown of black and white silk with a sable cape which must have cost a lot of money. She did not fail to perceive that he had a cab waiting and she laughed a little at that and told him to send the man away.

"I have my brougham here," she said in English almost as good as his own, though it was very obvious that she was a Spaniard and not one of those continental imitations in which the old Alhambra was fruitful.

John begged for a moment in which to pay and send away his cab and then he climbed into the brougham and sat beside her. It was not quite what he had hoped and it rather abashed him—but the perfume of her intoxicated him and even if she had said she was a duchess, he would have persisted.

The brougham drove off immediately and hardly had it left the theatre when this engaging lady began to explain.

"I can't go to Bates'—somebody would see me there. Of course you know that I live with Lord Leamington."

John knew nothing of the kind but he did not say so. The news was far from being agreeable to him.

"Well," he rejoined rather stupidly, "where shall we go to then?"

"Oh, to my house in the Avenue Road. Lal, my boy that is, you know, quite understands that I have my friends to see me sometimes—and then, oh, well, he's fishing in Scotland and so he won't know anything about it"—and she laughed shrilly, with the laughter of a woman who had known many lovers.

John felt a little uncomfortable but he had the nerve not to show it. After all, the girl was not married so there couldn't be any divorce damages or anything of that kind. He even wondered if the idea that he wanted to make love to her had entered her head at all and he was very much surprised when she suddenly turned to him and asked him a wholly unlooked-for question.

"Do you know why I said 'yes' to you to-night?" she asked. John said that he did not.

"Well, it was because of your name. I thought you might be some relation of a Lucy Blake I knew in Paris some years ago."

"Why, that's my sister. How did you know her? She's in India at present. Her husband's in the army."

"Yes, I know that. I was at Lady Wharton's pension

—your sister was there with me. Do you remember anything about that? You wouldn't, I suppose. You were too young."

"I was at Malvern then. All I know was that there was a great row and that a young Spaniard shot a Frenchman who had been making love to his sister."

"Carmen" was silent a little while. She seemed to be considering how much she should tell him. Presently her resolution was taken. She would tell him everything. It would be interesting to hear what Lucy's brother thought about it.

"That was my brother," she confessed quite composedly; "he shot Albert de Joinville because he was my lover. If he had been a Frenchman, he would have gone free. But as he was a Spaniard, they sent him to prison for seven years. Oh, think of it; my dear brother! Seven years."

John felt very awkward in this moment of what evidently was a very real emotion. He did not know what to say. His sympathy was very ordinary when at last he expressed it.

"What devilish bad luck. These Frenchmen are just like that. They all live with opera dancers and talk about English hypocrites. What did you, yourself, do after that? You must have had bad days. How did you get on?"

She shivered at the memory of it.

"It was hell—nothing else. Lady Wharton was sent out of France and except that curious old man, the Abbé Henry, I hadn't a friend. Lots of men wrote to me however, and offered me engagements. That's how I went to Buenos Aires with an Argentine. He treated me horribly and a young American in the Consulate saved me. I went to New York and they taught me to dance. Guess that's where I learned to speak English"—and she laughed at herself for her usage of the one word of argot with which all Englishmen branded all Americans at that date.

"You speak it very well," said John aimlessly. He was

almost frightened of her by this time and love-making had gone clean out of his mind. Not so on Carmen's part. She jumped lightly from her brougham when they reached her house in the Avenue Road and conducted him inside without any pretence of secrecy at all.

"Lal's in Scotland," she repeated; "if he weren't I shouldn't mind. He can't suppose I want a man of sixty-three about the place every night"—and she laughed at the drollery of the idea.

It was quite an artistic little house, though the sun of Oscar Wilde had not yet risen upon an upholstered firmament.

Most of the pictures were French and those in the bedrooms distinctly improper. A few antiques, lent by the Earl from Filey Castle, adorned the dining-room and the salon was agreeably destitute both of lustres and of wax flowers—those ornaments so cherished by the suburbanism of the day.

John perceived at once that supper had been laid for two persons and he fell to wondering how she *knew* that a guest would return with her. She, however, treated his presence as a matter of course and a fat maidservant took his hat and coat sympathetically, beaming a luscious welcome upon him. There was elegance everywhere, he observed, but elegance wedded to an atmosphere of sensualism which nobody made any pretence to conceal.

Now, for the first time, when she had thrown her furs aside and run her hand through her tousled hair, John was able to see her without her scenic *décor* and in the rôle of just an ordinary personage.

Very pretty undoubtedly she was, and just twenty-five years of age. The face, however, was marked deeply by debauch and the eyes, of a not too agreeable shade of dark blue, were far sunken in her head, and already there were faint wrinkles about them. Her hair was raven black and

very beautiful—her bust developed a little overmuch for a dancer—while, as for her legs, which the performance at the Alhambra had often shown him, men had declared with truth that there was not a finer pair in Europe. The hands, on the contrary, were thin and nervous, and when she laid one of them on John's wrists as they sat at table, he could almost have declared that somebody had given him an electric shock.

"Tell me," she asked, almost as soon as they had sat down, "what became of that cousin of yours, Sophie Fordacre. I remember her very well at the old woman Wharton's. She was hot stuff, if you like. It was through her all the trouble came about. I thought I was going to have a baby and I told Lucy Blake. It wasn't true, but Lucy wrote to my brother, and he came from San Sebastian and found Albert. There was a fight in a café and the Count struck Ramon. No Spanish gentleman lets a man strike him and, of course, my brother shot him. I don't think he could have done anything else—now, do you?"

John disliked this type of argument, for he had already determined that law-breaking was not profitable, in England at any rate; but the flashing eyes of the Señorita Carmenita, now become simply "Carmen," excited him curiously and he watched her animated gestures with admiration. What passion was there! What fire! How such a woman would love a man. And how much he wished that she had not invited him to her house merely to talk of his sister and his cousin. That old story of Paris he had heard a hundred times. He certainly did not want to hear it again on such a night.

"I suppose he could not," he observed presently, answering her question after an interval of thought, "things are so different in France. The pity is that all you nice girls were mixed up with such a man as Joinville."

"Oh, but he was not a bad man really. He liked women, but how many men do not? Why, even here in England,

some of these old fellows from your City come to our theatre night after night because of some little chorus girl. Adam must have been the only man who loved one woman and he hadn't much choice. Women are just the same as men in what they would like, but they are naturally afraid. Look at your pretty cousin, Sophie, for instance. I believe she'd have had fifty lovers if she'd had the chance. It was in her blood; she couldn't help it. Is she in London now, by any chance. Do you ever see her?"

"I haven't seen her for a year. And you're wrong about her having a lot of men. She married an old lawyer—one of my trustees—named Philip Hart-Brown and she stuck to him for four years. He died only last year and left her a great deal of money. Now I believe she's gone out to his brother who's a doctor in America, and she's staying in Boston. She'll marry an Indian, I suppose, and have a lot of children. She was a jolly girl, though, and when I was at Malvern she often sent me money. I liked her and I don't care who knows it."

"Ah, my pretty boy, and she liked you, I'm sure. Who would not, with your curly golden hair and your blue eyes. What a beautiful, beautiful body you have too. Oh, I am sure Sophie loved you as any girl would do. I shall love you myself presently" . . . and leaning across the table she began to play with the curls she had so much admired and to fondle him.

"You have loved many girls, John?"

"I have never loved a girl in my life."

"But you have known many girls. Of course, you have. You would not be a man if you had not. Tell me, who is the one at present? With which one do you live?"

"I don't live with anybody—I never have done"—he said it obstinately, half-ashamed of the admission. Perhaps some vague idea of the truth came to Carmen, for she jumped

up from the table and clapped her hands excitedly. How much this lout amused her.

It was six o'clock next afternoon when he left her house and he was still in his dress-clothes.

"You shall drive me to the theatre," she said; "of course, dearest, we can't meet often because of Lal. But whenever I am free, I will let you know."

John liked the arrangement immensely. He remembered with a kind of saturnine satisfaction that she had not asked him for money, and certainly he had not given her any.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOHN GETS A CERTIFICATE

JOHN BLAKE never rowed in the 'Varsity Eight, though he was quite good enough to do so.

His years at Cambridge were of those famous "nine," during which Oxford won every time, and people began to say that it really was not worth while going on with the affair at all. J. H. D. Goldie was to come up later on and to save the University from this reproach, but meanwhile the story was one of succeeding disasters.

Perhaps, if John had rowed, it might have been otherwise. He always liked to think so in after years when admiring women told him how strong he was and small boys watched him scull a boat on the Avon with obvious envy of his powers. Fate, however, and a railway accident decreed otherwise, and during the last year of his academic residence, he was able to do little at all by way of sport.

John, incidentally, met his future wife at the time of this unhappy and terrible tragedy, though at the moment of it he had not an idea that the future had this fate for him.

Yet that was the lady's destiny, and pretty enough she looked as she sat opposite to him in the corner of a first-class carriage and actually accepted an offer of his *Punch*, to the great amusement of a patrician old gentleman who sat in one of the other corners and seemed almost on the point of saying: "Bless you, my children."

"We've met somewhere," was John's apology for his attentions. She thought so, too, and suggested the Vicar

of Wichfield's bazaar last year. Anyhow it did not matter.

John had been asked by Dicky Gilbert to go down and spend the short Easter vac. at his place near Rugby, when he had been promised the excitements of rabbit-shooting and billiards.

He caught a late afternoon train from Euston and duly clothed in a smart check suit of tremendous pattern and an "Ulster" coming down to his heels, he entered one of those quaint little first-class carriages with four wheels and was settling down in the near-side corner when the old gentleman aforesaid appeared and declared the seat to be his.

John did not care a brass farthing where he sat, and one corner was, for him, as good as another. So he moved along the seat and was just settling down again when in popped the young lady with her bags and her baskets, and allowing merely two sandwiches to fall from the packet she carried (no Englishwoman at that period travelled without food), she flopped into her seat and declared it to be awful.

"I do believe I've left my hat-box in the cab," she said; and, as even John could admit, that was the ultimate catastrophe.

"But you've got another hat," he said gaily; "you've got one on your head."

"Oh, yes, but what will mother say? That hat cost a guinea, and guineas don't lie about everywhere. Oh, I shall catch it—I know I shall."

John said he hoped she would not, and then reminded her of her unpleasant situation.

"You know you're in a smoking carriage."

She laughed.

"Of course I do. Isn't that gentleman smoking?"

"Thank you," exclaimed the patrician joining in, "thank you for the description. Most young ladies appear to think that anybody who smokes cannot be a gentleman."

"What nonsense! I like it. Men aren't happy unless they're smoking or doing something else they ought not to do. And I do hate travelling with old ladies. They always want to give me good advice or something, and you know I really don't need anything of the kind. I'm quite able to advise myself."

John took a good look at her and was sure that she was.

About twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, he thought her. She had rather pretty brown hair and very frank blue eyes of obvious magnetic power. Her figure was robust and the cloak thrown back and the full skirts below it a little awry, permitted him to imagine that her legs were fine. She had long thin hands and wore a diamond ring on the fatal finger.

"Engaged," thought John; "I wonder to whom?" He couldn't remember any man, though her face seemed very familiar to him.

They drew the trains from Euston to Chalk Farm by two powerful engines at that time, and the steel cable which used to pull them up the hill was forgotten.

The journey, however, was very slow usually all the way to Tring and particularly slow to Harrow. John was glad that the girl accepted the offer of his *Punch* and gladder still when the wretched oil lamps forbade any pretence of reading it. So they talked flippantly and with young folk's freedom. She was engaged to Captain Morton of the Queen's Own, she told him, and going to be married in September. Her own name was Dixie, Emily Dixie, and she lived at Poynter's Hall, near Rugby. What—he was going to Rugby too! How jolly! And she knew the Gilberts; knew them very well.

"We shall meet," she said; and John, of course, had to admit that it was the desire of his heart, which it certainly was at the moment.

It was just about this time that both the engines of the train began to whistle loudly—an alarming sound in the days when the " block" system of signalling was unknown, and station-masters and signalmen let any train go by if the preceding train were ten minutes ahead of it.

This whistling seemed to say that something untoward had happened, and while Emily Dixie asked quickly—"What's that?" the elderly patrician turned very pale though he did not take his enormous meerschaum pipe from his mouth.

A moment later there was a tremendous crash, followed by the dread sound of ripping boards and splintering iron and the screams both of men and women. John's carriage turned completely over and lay upon its side; the lights had all gone out, and he found himself almost helpless for some minutes with the body of the dead patrician pressing so heavily upon him that the blood from it ran down his very face and almost choked him. One tremendous effort he made as he fought for light and air upward to the broken window above him, and at long last he gripped the handle of the door and opened it.

He was cut and bloody, but had no apparently serious wound. All his faculties quickened by disaster, he began to delve in the carnage he had so luckily quitted and to drag the bodies from it: first, the old gentleman, whose meerschaum pipe had gone clean through his throat and was sticking out behind; then little Emily Dixie, deadly pale, insensible and moaning. John laid her on the grass by the side of the track and then suddenly discovered that there was fresh blood upon his fingers, and that it had come from the young girl's body.

"A light, a light here!" he cried to the figures about him, moving ominously in the darkness.

He might as well have cried for the moon. Everybody, it appeared, thought only of his safety, and men were still

running about the neighbouring fields, here and there and back again madly as horses gone blind with terror. And while they were so running, the second train crashed into the wreckage and the very gates of hell were opened. There had been no such accident on the famous North Western Railway in all its history. The story books were to tell of it with awe for many a long day to come.

John hardly knew what he did for the next hour.

Men collected wreckage and lighted fires by the track-side that the doctors, come down in haste from the little town of Harrow-on-the-Hill, might see to do their work; and in the dull red cloud of their flame, many fought for the salvation of the groaning captives and wrestled almost blindly with wood and metal and labyrinth of wreckage.

John himself tore his very shirt from his back and moved, half-naked, in that shadow land. The cries of the maimed and the mangled invited that pity which none had time to bestow.

"Save them, save them," the gallant band would cry. "Save us for God's sake!" cried those in the darkness where also lay the dead.

From such lamentations John returned at last to Emily Dixie's side. He had already cut away the bodice from the bleeding shoulder and bound the wound as well as any unskilled man could have done, but she did not recover consciousness and still lay moaning. John gripped the first doctor who came near them as though he were an assassin or a thief and dragged him to the place.

"Quite a young girl—I know her—please do your best. I have tied her up somehow—dreadfully hurt, I fear. Oh, please do what you can. She is so young and pretty."

The doctor said nothing. It was not the hour for cynicism.

He realized immediately that the girl was suffering from concussion, and he shouted to some of the platelayers to

come along with a hurdle, since stretchers did not abound in Harrow in those simple days. So they lifted Emily Dixie up and carried her to the little station, some quarter of a mile away, John walking grimly by her side and feeling somehow that she had some unusual claim upon his protection and his sympathy. When they entered the waiting-room, he found there was hardly space even for one new patient in that improvised hospital, and he was just about to suggest to the bearers that they should go out into the village and try to find a bed there, when he fell headlong in a faint and actually lay motionless upon the body of a dead soldier.

"Just a tramp too, by the look of him," said the local porter with an air of some importance. Fortunately John's doctor, as he called him afterwards, came in at the moment and hastened to convince them that the stricken man was neither dead nor a derelict.

"A very fine young fellow, who has been doing splendid work. Just help me to lay him down here, and bring along those smelling-salts. We shall save him all right, I think. Ah, I see broken ribs and, perhaps, a collar-bone as well. He's a plucky young chap, I must say, to have done what he did in a state like that."

John was far from being able to hear this eulogy.

When he woke up he found himself in a great tent and the sounds that came to him were not those of human voices. Lions roared and tigers snarled; and upon that there was the chattering of monkeys.

"Wombwell's Menagerie," thought John; and sure enough it was.

They had carried the injured into its spacious tents where they awaited the special trains, and men said it was lucky that this wild beast show happened to be in the vicinity of Harrow at that time. John listened to the howling for some time and then to sounds less pleasant. Poor people all around him were groaning and crying. He had never under-

stood hitherto how terrible a thing a railway accident might be and he fell to speculating as to his own injuries. Somebody had strapped his arm to his side already and there appeared to be a bandage about his ribs. Was he dangerously hurt then? Was he likely to die? That was the first time in all his life that death had come near to him and he shuddered.

His own doctor returned presently to see how he did and his kindly manner abated John's natural fears.

"Die, pooh-pooh—a great strong man like you. You've broken a rib and fractured a collar-bone and you'll probably be in bed a week. One of the lucky ones, my boy. There'll be a special to the north in the morning and another to London. You must tell them which you'll take."

John really did not know.

"It's rough on people to go taking broken ribs to their houses," he observed ruefully; "perhaps I'd better go to London. You see, Rugby isn't exactly an invalid's town."

"Rugby, Rugby—why Robert Farner, the first doctor there, is my cousin—same name too. If the people you're going to don't want you, I'll get Bob to put you into his hospital for a week and look after you. Capital idea. They'll find your luggage in the wreck, I suppose—and eh, you had a coat, hadn't you? Well we must try to find that first of all."

John admitted that he had a coat; but he also had a warm memory of Emily Dixie in his mind and he reproached himself for not asking after her before. Whither had they taken her? How did she fare? "Such a jolly little girl, doctor. I hope it isn't very bad with her!"

The doctor wasn't sure. She had been carried up to the school infirmary where many other poor creatures already lay and she had still been unconscious when Farner had left her. Obviously, he was anxious. A splinter of wood had gone deep into her shoulder and he feared internal injuries.

"But she'll be well looked after, my boy—I'll see to that. Engaged to you, by any chance? Is that your interest?"

John said that he wished she were, though he did not really mean it.

Sentimentalism provoked the admission; and when he thought of so pretty a little lady, lying there gashed and insensible, he was moved as he rarely had been in all his life.

What a cruel business was this Destiny! How difficult it was to believe in anything at all. And yet men still prayed, and that splendid fellow Arthur St. Just was as sure about Jesus Christ as though he had heard the divine message with his own ears. John could make nothing of it.

They sent him next day to Rugby, and both Dr. Robert Farner and Dicky Gilbert met him.

Dicky said his father, Sir Alastair Gilbert, would not hear of John going anywhere else than to Seton Manor, the Gilberts' home since the Conqueror, and there he was driven, to his great satisfaction. Quite a national hero he had become, as Dicky insisted. His name in all the papers . . . and all that.

"They say you tore your shirt off your back," the young man affirmed boisterously; "the Vicar's wife isn't sure it was quite decent. Some scribbler says you ran about like a demon in the firelight and killed more women than you saved by your ferocious appearance. Not really, John. I'm chaffing. You do seem to have done big things though. The station-master at Rugby says you were Lord Nelson and Florence Nightingale rolled into one. You ought to be knighted or something."

John did not want anything of the kind at that particular moment, though he sighed vainly for such an honour afterwards.

He was thankful to be received so hospitably by two such dear old people—one of them, Sir Alastair, a militant and

unrelenting Protestant reformer (who had several Oriental works of dubious piety locked up in a drawer of his bookcase) and the other a charming old lady who had never committed a sin in her life but was horribly afraid of hell-fire. They certainly treated him as a hero and when he told them about poor little Emily Dixie, Sir Alastair blew his nose and his dear wife cried.

"Of course, we know them well. A little High Church and actually approving the surplice in the pulpit, but very honourable and high-minded people. Mr. Dixie had made his money selling idols to the West African natives, but trade is trade and if people will worship idols, how is anybody to stop them? Such benighted souls, alas, do not believe in hell. Even our good missionaries fail to teach them that."

John said he was sorry, but his sorrow turned to gladness a week later when Dicky offered to drive him over to Poynters Hall to inquire about the maiden.

The house was modern but spacious, and it boasted an "orangery" in which no orange had ever been known to ripen.

Mr. Dixie was a man whom Africa had baked and a lack of culture muted. He spoke with short, snappy barks, as though his auditors were dogs, while his black-eyed little wife often regarded him with displeasure and never forgot the engaging captain of Hussars, who once came back from the Cape with her and made a bold attempt (alas! successful) upon her virtue. It was her only fall from grace—and its mere confession in her silent prayers was a quasi-Masochistic pleasure she would enjoy to the end of her days.

How grateful the pair of them were to John for what he had done on the night of the accident. "Saved their daughter's life," and that kind of nonsense. Mrs. Dixie took both his hands in hers and looked as though she were about to kiss him. The old gentleman barked his best.

"My thanks, sir. Damned well done, sir. No business to have accidents of that kind on their damned line. Written to *The Times*. Killing people, sir, to pay dividends. Butcher a director and you'll have things safer. Nearly killed my little girl, they did. An inch more to port and it 'ud have been through 'er 'eart. I'm under an obligation, sir."

Mrs. Dixie always said "Oh, 'Enery" when her husband dropped an "aitch," but to give him his due, this omission was hardly to be observed except in cases of great excitement.

For John, the main thing was that they led him out to the orangery, where Emily was displayed as the choicest "fruit," and her wrap was wonderful and Paisley of course.

She was pitifully pale and there were heavy bandages about her shoulders; but the eyes were brighter again when she saw John and she actually pulled his head down to her that she might kiss him on the brow. Mamma cried "Oh, Emily" at this and papa made strange noises in his throat; but Emily seemed to enjoy their consternation and was soon babbling away in a manner which should have been forbidden to an invalid.

"Wasn't it a crash? Oh, I dream about it every night. I'm almost afraid to go to sleep. Lucky it wasn't on my honeymoon" (here she exchanged glances not in the catechism with John) "I have not written Ken yet, my husband . . . that is my husband to be, because I'm frightened that he'll come over from Dublin and kill somebody. Ireland makes everybody so awfully savage, you know—and Ken does fly into such tempers. Once, when another man danced three times with me at the Hospital Ball in Warwick, Ken threw a china vase at him and broke it all to pieces. 'Louis the Something' it was and he had to pay an awful lot of money for it. Besides, it didn't hit anybody and so it was wasted. I shall tell him now and he'll come dashing along. You're

at Cambridge, aren't you, and I suppose you're anxious to get back. . . ."

"Not at this present moment," said John gallantly; "I don't want to be anywhere except here. . . ."

"Oh, but that's foolish. I'm sold like a 'lot' in an auction sale and it only remains to bind me and hand me over." And she laughed sideways at him again, for she really was a very naughty young lady.

John did not quite know what to say. He was still a little nervous of pretty girls and hated any coarseness in the mouths of women. So he just turned the talk aside by expressing the hope that she would let him know when she was going to get married.

"I'll come and see you turned off—upon my word, I will. Do send me an invitation?"

"Of course I will. I want to have it in London at St. George's, Hanover Square, if pa will consent. He's so troublesome about his money, though. As if it mattered—he's got such a lot and I'm not married every day. At least, I hope not."

John laughed at that.

"Give me a chance among others?" he suggested—and that amused her too.

"I must have a waiting list, just as they do at Rugby School. But seriously, you will come?"

"I would cross the burning Sahara to do so."

"It will be in September——"

"Just when we go up for the October term."

"And you're to be the second!"

"I'll butcher anybody who says I'm not."

"Brave boy!"

And how many a true word . . . as the adage says! John forgot all about her in a fortnight, which clearly proved that he was not in love with her—while as for Miss Emily Dixie, it is to be doubted if ever she was in love with anybody

in the course of all her adventurous life. None the less it amused them to say pretty things and they parted just as though they had known each other since childhood and were determined to "possess" each other some day.

John returned to Wichfield a few days later and there passed the rest of the Easter vac. The grizzling Earl never liked him and his aunt deplored secretly the undoubted fact that he was common. "I cannot think where he gets it from," she observed to the Earl one day when that worthy was afflicted with a mild attack of the intellect and actually perpetrated a joke. "Bold as brass," he said—and then—"Wasn't the grandfather a brassfounder?" Certainly, the Countess fell to wondering if anything had happened to him mentally to provoke such staggering wit.

But the odd thing was that, within a week from the day of this talk, Lady Wichfield received a letter from the surviving partner in Philip Hart-Brown's old business and in it she read the news that aged Mr. Marthan was retiring from the famous brassfoundry in Birmingham which John's ancestor had founded and that a junior partnership might be purchased in that undoubtedly fine business for the sum of two thousand pounds. What a chance to establish John for life! Yet was it? And what would the county say if she had a nephew in trade? Long she debated the matter with the Earl and prolonged were their arguments.

"It isn't a common business, Leonard. A great foundry—worthy of Birmingham, you must admit."

"That's not saying much—worthy of Birmingham. He'll be selling boots in the Burlington Arcade next."

"Does it really matter? He's not one of us. He never will be. Cambridge hasn't made much difference to him and nothing on earth will ever teach him manners. If he goes to Birmingham, we shall wash our hands of a great responsibility . . . and I'll see he doesn't often come here."

"In that case," said the Earl, "two thousand pounds would not be too much to pay."

John himself was immensely tickled by the idea.

Brass! Why, that suggested gold, and he was very fond of gold. He had often heard his dead father joke about the fortunes made by selling brass images in Africa and the East; and he remembered how such jests had pained that worthy if bigoted priest, Arthur St. Just.

John did not care a twopenny damn about the religious aspect of it, for he had no religion; nor was he moved by the thought of social consequences.

"A damned lot of snobs," he called the county people, and he delighted in outraging their conventions, even daring to tell the Bishop's wife that the true practice of the Christian creed would make all men equal and that public-houses were capital places for the poor.

His grandfather's spirit inspired all that he did or said—that bluff old man who wore navvy's boots and counted his coppers o' nights. John was just like him—though a little more virtuous, since "grandfather" was disgustingly fond of low amours. Certainly, John was all for it when it came to the making of idols.

In this determination even the visit to Wichfield Castle of his sister Lucy did not shake him.

Lucy had become terribly sedate by this time and was the mother of two bouncing children. Freddy had become a captain and really was a very good husband, who actually had been faithful to his pretty wife for six long years.

Sometimes Lucy blushed to remember the things her cousin Sophie had made her say and think when she was a mere child; but all that was past and done with; and now she wore a black lace cap on her head and a shawl about her shoulders and taught Freddy (fibs) all about hell-fire and Moses and was determined that her daughter (soberly christened Angelica) should grow up a saint. Of course,

she was horrified at the idea of brass-founding and she did not hesitate to say so.

"But, John, whatever will they say about it in the army? A brassfounder. Oh, dear, it will be awful if they christen you 'Kettles.'"

"Let 'em, Lucy—the army doesn't pay me, and Freddy doesn't get enough out of it to settle his mess bill. I'm not a Radical, though I think John Bright's a splendid fellow. But I do think that you and I are only spurious aristocrats and that we've no more blue blood in us than your dog there. What humbug to ask what anybody thinks. They'll think a lot if I make money . . . and that, you bet, I'm going to do."

Obviously it was no good arguing with such a man and so the matter was settled.

John went back to Cambridge to take a fair degree, but not to row in the 'Varsity Eight as he had hoped. A railway company made him famous by presenting him with a certificate of honour for what he did in the accident at Harrow, and all the servants at Caius declared when they pocketed his tips that he was the meanest customer who had been in Cambridge in all their experience.

Incidentally, he did go to Emily Dixie's wedding, dressed in a very large (if slightly provincial) frock-coat and carrying a highly polished top-hat in his huge hand.

She looked very pretty, he thought, and she positively beamed orange-blossom upon him as Captain Kenneth Morton conducted her down the aisle upon her way to post-nuptial joys.

The man himself was a freckle-faced Scotsman who looked as though he would drink whisky with lions and care not at all who paid for it . . . as long as he did not. A bad-tempered fellow, who actually swore at the verger in the porch because there was some delay with the carriages at the time of the going away.

"She'll have a bad time with him," John thought. . . . And then he reflected that it did not matter to him as most certainly he would never see her again.

That was not a good guess.

John Blake was to see quite a lot of Emily Dixie when a "few more years had rolled," as a certain rather gloomy hymn observes.

CHAPTER XIX

WE HEAR ABOUT RELIGION

SOPHIE HART-BROWN, in a comfortable home in Boston, did not at first yearn for English flowers and fields, as many exiles have done . . . nor did the blossoms of April provide the idea that she should sigh with Browning and desire "to be there."

That good man, Philip Hart-Brown, whose secret wife she had been during four happy if unsettled years, had often told her that, if anything happened to him, she was to go out to America to his brother William, a doctor in Boston and childless. Sophie went there accordingly and found a warm welcome from a kindly old gentleman who certainly was Philip's double and as like him as one pea is to another. Just the same sly admiration for women, the same shrewdness, the same determination to go thus far and no farther. And one moreover, whose American wife was just the kind of woman such a man should have married.

Such a wonder at making puddings she was! So very fond of a "little drop" of something before going to bed o' nights. The doctor approved the latter treatment but did not prescribe the pastry. He knew well what the human stomach can suffer.

Sophie lived quite happily with this benign couple for nearly a year and being averse from charity, she always insisted that she should "pay her shot" and that her presents at Christmas-time should not be less generous than those bestowed upon her.

Sometimes, she craved to hear news from home, as she still must call it, and actually wrote to her father to tell him how she was and how situated. That prig, Greville Fordacre, replied curtly that he was pleased to hear of her being in America and hoped that she would stop there. Lucy's letters, however, were far kinder though there was a certain reserve about them which Sophie was clever enough to understand. "Her husband does not like her writing," she thought, and that was very true.

From one man, and one alone, she received literary kindness, and he was that saintly priest, Arthur St. Just. He had known all about her wedding, for he married her to Philip Hart-Brown and buried that good fellow despite the protest of the Vicar of St. Martin's, who ought to have done the job. Father Arthur wrote often and always in a manly strain. He desired to see her married again and told her so frankly. The brain of a man of the world truly schemed and loved beneath that Roman biretta.

Father Arthur was living difficult days himself at that time, and mobs in the south of London were throwing bricks at him and at the church in which he now ministered.

Beery men, who had never entered a place of worship in their lives (unless *nolens volens*, when they were baptized) assembled every Sunday night in and about the famous church of St. George at Southwark and declared stoutly that they were not going to have any surpliced choir singing their psalms nor to permit any "confessing" priest to wear any garment but a black gown in the pulpit.

"Ruining our daughters, that's what he'll be doing next," they declared—though had their daughters been produced, the offence suggested obviously would have been one for a hero to perpetrate.

Father Arthur just ignored them; but drink and the devil soon did for him and after one terrible night, when a filthy concourse of raving, drunken blasphemers tore down the

hangings from the altar and danced a jig around the very sanctuary, the good priest surrendered *malgré lui*, and went off to found his little monastery near Windsor, there to rediscover that peace which passeth understanding.

It was here, seven years after he had married Sophie Fordacre to the lawyer, that Father Arthur received from Sophie a letter which, indeed, surprised him as tidings of men and women and their affairs so rarely did. She was married again, she said, and she was happy. Moreover, she appeared to have got religion and to have got it badly. The letter had been sent to the vicarage of St. George's but came to the priest in his convent retreat. He had to read it often before he knew how to answer it. Sophie was in New York and her letter had been written from the Holland House Hotel, then the most considerable hotel in that quite modest city. And this is the way it ran:

"Holland House Hotel,
"New York City,
"June 4th, 1872.

"My dear Father Arthur:

"I have long owed you a letter, but there was so little to write about. We went up to the lakes this spring and saw that awful city of Chicago . . . but the lakes are beautiful, and they have great big steamers on them just as though you were on the sea. One of them they tell me is of eight hundred tons, and you know the ships in which we cross the ocean are not often of two thousand tons. It was in Canada, Father, that the great thing happened to me and I met George Washington Addy, who, they say, has Indian blood in his veins, though you would never think it to look at him. He is six feet three inches tall, as strong as a lion, and one of the finest men I have ever seen in my life. It is just possible that you may have heard of him, for he founded a Church in

Baltimore, and we are now opening another in New York —that's what brings us to this place, which is quite a pleasant city and looks to me just about as large as Birmingham. There are what they call 'horse-cars' in its streets—sort of railway carriages drawn by horses and you go everywhere in them for a few cents, which is very convenient and I hope will be copied in London.

"Well, Father, I must tell you about the new religion George has founded, because I am his wife now, and have been married to him for more than a month.

"George believes in the Gospel of the Maintained Word. Christ, he says, plainly commanded us to sell what we have and give it to the poor, but that does not mean that we all go naked and live in caves, but that we should rally to the support of any Church which is clearly maintaining the Word once delivered to the Saints. There was not one Gospel for all time, he says, and the idea that the great Apostles and martyrs only lived *once* is not reasonable in these days. St. Paul, he says, has spoken to us through many generations, and George believes that he, himself, is really that George of Cappadocia, who is our English saint as you, of course, don't need to be told. I don't profess to understand it all, but I never heard anybody more eloquent than George in the pulpit—and if you could see and hear him you would agree with me. As for the people, they simply love him, and the women behave in a most ridiculous way—he got more than four hundred dollars at his 'Mystic Spirit Conversazione' last Sunday night, and there came fifty more dollars to-day.

"Father, I do love him very much, but there is one thing in which I ask you to help me.

"George doesn't know how much money I've got, and I don't intend to tell him. He says that I ought to get whatever I have got out of the Bank of England and put it in America. I don't want to do this, so please help

me and tell the solicitors in Birmingham not to send anything *even if I write* for it. I shall be able to get all the money I want from my brother-in-law in Boston, who really loves me very much, but for some reason or other I cannot make out, simply detests George.

"Dear Father, you don't think I'm very wicked, do you, to have to tell all these lies. After all, I don't really know anything about George, and I think I would be a fool to give him all my money just because I am married to him now, don't you?"

Arthur St. Just sighed when he had read the letter for its meaning was all too plain. The poor girl had married some rascally impostor just because he was a very fine man, and in a month she had found him out. Maintained Word, forsooth! Maintained villain more probably, and chiefly by neurotic women. He foresaw great unhappiness for poor little Sophie, who had suffered so much for her temperament in a censorious world; and never did a letter give more satisfaction than when he heard from Hart-Brown's old firm that the money which Philip had left was, in fact, a trust; and that the last thing they would think of doing was handing it over to some religious impostor in America.

Herein they showed their wisdom, and six months had not passed when Arthur St. Just received another letter, this time from Boston, in which pretty Sophie informed him, with a pen dipped in tears, that she had returned to her brother-in-law's house and that she was about to become a mother.

"Never will I trust any man in all this world again," she wrote. "George deserted me a month ago at Baltimore, and I have just heard that he was almost lynched in Virginia for being found in bed with one of the daughters of the White Robed Saints there. I can't tell you what I feel, dear Father. If it were not for the kindness of my

brother-in-law and his wife, I think I should go mad. Oh, how I long for England sometimes, for English faces and English voices, and all the culture and the manners of our English men. This is a barbarous country and its habits are too awful; I've found it out now. Just to see these people eating is enough to make you sick; and their boasting and the lies and their spitting everywhere would drive most civilized people to distraction. Now, do you think I dare come back, dear Father? Would people be very unkind to me? I long above everything to have my baby at home, and for you to baptize him. Will you help me in this, you who have been such a dear friend through everything?"

Arthur St. Just was touched by this appeal, and he answered it immediately. His convent at Windsor was one of "Nursing Sisters," and if Sophie came back, Mother Agnes, the Superior would see to everything for her. He thought it wise for her to come, but only if she were quite sure that her husband would not return to her.

For here was a man who believed in the indissolubility of marriage—even when one of the partners in that Sacrament had, almost publicly, disported himself in the arms of another lady.

CHAPTER XX

JOHN GOES TO PARIS

JOHN BLAKE made a capital brassfounder and he found life at Birmingham very pleasant.

The town was then a pleasant rendezvous for manufacturers, farmers and quite jovial county people, and all these met at the old Hen and Chickens on Thursdays, for the markets; and many a good bottle of wine was cracked before horses were "put to" again, and the jolly procession of gigs and dog-carts and phaetons—to say nothing of many horsemen—set out for Moseley or Sutton or Harborne or Smethwick to carry the reinvigorated owners back to their respective tasks.

John hunted a little, but not much, for he hated paying a subscription to the hunt, and his uncle, the Earl, was driven more than once to send twenty pounds to the secretary to save the family name.

"That boor wouldn't pay sixpence to save the Queen from bankruptcy," he observed to his patient wife one day; and the gracious Helen had to admit that it was true.

"But it's cheap at the price," she suggested, referring to the subscription; "don't you see it will make him too ashamed to come here, and that is exactly what we want. Where he gets it all from I really don't know. His father was one of the most generous men in Warwickshire—he ruined himself by his extravagance. Perhaps that accounts for it; the boy may be afraid of going the same way."

"He may go to the devil for all I care," rejoined the Earl; and that was really meant.

John did not go to the devil—he went to the brass-foundry and very soon made himself more than useful there. The retiring partner, Jonas Marthan had played ducks and drakes with a once fine business, and having chosen to hunt three days a week, had spent the other three in an effort to discover how much he owed his creditors.

John, upon the other hand, was in his office at half-past eight most days, and he did not leave it until six or seven at night. Even on Saturdays he was usually about until half-past four; and for the first three years, at any rate, he hardly knew what it was to enjoy any leisure. "Never neglect your business," had been his grandfather's watchword, and John heeded it diligently.

He was a cute fellow enough and very saving, and he turned out idols and brass beads for the poor benighted heathen with an industry which astonished. Even that worthy Curate of St. George's church—with whom he shared rooms at Edgbaston—could not but admire his industry, though a little doubtful about the idols.

"Do you think we have any right to make such things?" he would ask a little sadly sometimes. John rejoined that by making them he was assuring the ultimate stability of the only true religion.

"Our missionaries will teach 'em different," he urged, ignoring his grammar; "they'll melt these things down some day and make buttons of 'em. My dear fellow, this town lives on the heathen, and if you begin to talk pious rot about it, the sooner you get out of Birmingham the better."

Cyril Digby, the curate in question, did not desire to get out of Birmingham, and he made no bones about saying so.

"What is ordained is ordained," he observed shrewdly, and continued to drink excellent port wine at John's expense and to preach admirable sermons on "original sin."

John prospered meanwhile, though it is to be doubted if it were "before the Lord." The terrible Franco-German War of 1870 had been a blessing to Birmingham, whose furnaces vomited flames by night and by day as though the corpses of the slain were there being cremated that gold might flow into the crucibles. When the War was over, John was one of the first of the Englishmen to enter Paris, and that was an experience he never forgot. The Commune caught him and he witnessed the burning of the beautiful palace of the Tuileries, and was present when the famous Hôtel de Ville went down in flames.

"Mad, mad people," he said, "to destroy so much valuable property. And the villainy of shooting a venerable archbishop and three generals as 'hostages.' "

Bullets seemed cheap in that city of fire and slaughter. He never forgot the screams of the dying nor the shrieks of the "petroleuses"—those blackened harpies out of hell who ran from street to street burning every building they could enter, and falling themselves at last, mangled flesh upon a heap of corpses.

John dodged the bullets and showed much courage during those terrible days.

He lodged at the Grand Hotel, and had a pretty little flirtation with a so-called Polish chambermaid, though he would have sworn she was a German. This fact he kept to himself, for had it been discovered she would most certainly have had her brains knocked out.

John gave her a hundred francs for herself and went back to England to make *Louis Seize* andirons in brass later on and inkstands which Napoleon *might* have used. That way came a lot of money to the brassfoundry, and by the time the young man was twenty-six years of age he was quite well off, and listened patiently to those of his friends who told him he should get married. Not a bad idea, he thought, if the girl could be found. One of the economical kind who would

weigh all the meat that came in and count the sacks of coal at the door.

There were plenty of that kind in Birmingham, but, frankly, he did not like their "mugs."

Cyril Digby's sister, a hatchet-faced lady of thirty-two, made a bold attempt to catch him and wrote him many letters which a curate's sister should not have written—but he knew enough to write nothing compromising in return, and was always "yours truly" when he signed the documents.

The thing came to an end when that ridiculous lady, in her endeavour to please him, attended the musical festival ball in that city as a shepherdess and in a dress so short that certain white frills were to be discerned when she sat down and crossed her legs. It was not an age for short dresses even for shepherdesses, and the spinster element was aroused.

Shocking! Awful! The woman was no better than a common play-actress. Some even wrote to the bishop that he might visit the sins of the sister upon the offending bachelor brother—but this was too much for John, and he sent his episcopal lordship a "stinger" in which he asked him, as one man to another, if there was anything particularly wicked in a woman's legs; and if so, what? That finished it, but poor Anne Digby had to quit Birmingham, and ultimately she married a wholesale butcher at York, who was nearly sixty-two years of age at the time.

Perhaps John was right to be a little shy of nymphs.

There was nothing whatever Sadistic about him, and he preferred at all times a jolly flashy woman to one who cowered and simpered and blushed.

"Give me a girl who has a figure and two bright eyes," he would say, "and you may keep all the copybook virgins." The idea that such a woman might boss him did not trouble him at all.

"I should stand it as long as it pleased me," he urged, "and then I should wring her damned neck."

The trouble was to find such a lady, and he had been looking for her for two years when a visit to London "on business" revealed her in a flash and his Destiny stood before him in a gorgeous evening frock and with a lover about to die for her. It was at the old Queen's Theatre, into which he had strolled almost by accident . . . and there he saw none other than Emily Dixie, and his heart beat so fast at the sight of her that she might have been the only woman in a gay philanderer's story. The first question he asked himself was, how the devil did she get there?

The play was that old melodrama, *Cagliostro*, by the great Alexander Dumas. A new actor—afterwards to make a great reputation in comedy at the Haymarket Theatre—played the leading part and a new actress "Sara Fleury" appeared in with him and made so great a success that the whole town was staggered and gave a riotous welcome to the newcomer. John took one look at her when she came on the stage and saw she was not "Sara Fleury" at all. She was Emily Dixie, his little friend of the railway accident, and wasn't he pleased to see her, that's all.

She could not see him that night, she was supping with Mr. and Mrs. Irving and Miss Ellen Terry, she wrote on the back of the card he sent round to her—but to-morrow, she would be glad if he would come and have tea with her at her apartments in the Inverness Terrace at Bayswater; and, of course, he was there to the tick, although he usually had "tea" at seven o'clock and took ham and eggs with it. She was much changed, he thought; become a woman and a "dasher" at that. John was quite awed when he shook hands with her, but she soon put him at his ease and there they were, chatting away quite in the old style and as sympathetic, one to the other, as though they had known each other all their lives.

"Fancy, its being you—just fancy. John Blake of whom I have thought so often since I was in India. Isn't it really wonderful?"

John said it was and really believed her, though, as a matter of fact, she had forgotten all about him two days after her wedding and had never thought of him again until she got his card last night.

"Where's your husband—still in India?"—one of John's first questions of course. She bit her lip and looked as though she wished he had not asked her.

"A bad story, my dear boy—really I shall have to call you John . . . Ken died in India. Don't speak of it too much. Oh, I've lived dreadful years. Now I am trying, trying to forget them. That's why I have gone on the stage."

He said he was frightfully sorry . . . but no more than that. The loss of her husband filled his mind with content. He had never cared much about husbands.

"And so you're on the stage! In a big part, too. Why, I always thought it took years and years to manage it. How did you do it, Mrs. Morton?"

"Don't Mrs. Morton me. I'm just Emily to you. Why, we were children together. You know my father's dead, of course. Unfortunately he hated my marriage and left all his money to mother to do what she likes with. Now my brother Roger is likely to get most of it, though I had twenty thousand settled on me when I was married and that's something. So I shan't starve. People say I've a future on the stage. You must go to a lot of plays. Now, tell me truly. Do you think I'm clever or do you not?"

"Why, I think you're most awfully clever. How did you manage it? Most people take years and years to get where you are—and they starve in barns and things. You must be a genius to do what you've done. And with this new man, John Dean, whom there's such a row about. Don't some say he's a genius and others call him a barn-stormer! I've heard it's so. . . ."

Emily laughed.

"I think he's the greatest actor alive. How could I help it? He picked me out of Halévy's studio in Paris where I had gone to learn something about it, and any man who did that must be a genius. Why, dear boy, until I appeared in a comic opera at Karachi and acted with the officers of the Manchesters there, I'd never been on the stage in my life. Then they told me I was a Sarah Bernhardt and, of course, I had to believe them. When Ken died and left me alone—thank God—I came back to Europe and stopped for six months in Paris to have a good time. Mother didn't want me when she heard that I'd been 'talked' about in India, and Ken's friends put it about that I was a bad lot. Perhaps I never would have come to England again if it hadn't been for Mr. Dean. He happened to be in Paris and called in to Monsieur Halévy's studio just when I was playing in this very *Cagliostro*. 'There is the lady I want,' he said; and so here I am in London and I've made a success and he's paying me ten pounds a week—what do you think of that, dear boy, ten whole pounds a week and I'm only on the stage for one act."

John said it was splendid. He wished she would have talked more about her dear husband, but on that subject she was curiously elusive and merely reiterated from time to time the confession that she had had the hell of a time.

"He was one of the worst," she declared; "drank like a fish from the day we set foot in India and thrashed me with a horse-whip before we had been married six months. Oh, you don't know. But now I am free but very lonely, John"—and here she looked at him very tenderly and to his amazement, she took a little cigarette-making machine from her mantelpiece and actually rolled herself a cigarette.

"You smoke, Emily?"

"Why not, John? All the Russian women do."

"Yes—but here. My hat, people will talk!"

"Does it much matter? And these people who talk! Would they give me sixpence if I were starving?"

"I don't suppose they would. Anyway, there was a Russian woman who used to sing at the Alhambra and she smoked cigars. It got her talked about all right."

"If people talk about me, I shall be very pleased. That's what I want, John. Don't you see I mean to make a great big success of the theatre. I shall have one of my own presently . . . and you will manage it for me. There's an idea for you. 'Sara Fleury, managed by that famous manufacturer, John Blake.' Why, we should make a fortune together, you and I."

John shook his head.

"But I don't know anything about theatres!"

"All the better. Those who do always lose their money. You and I would just be commercial. We should think of the public all the time. Oh, my dear boy, surely it's a splendid day that brought us together. Such affinities we are! Do you know that when you kiss me, a shock runs all over my body, just like electricity. We're made for each other, that's sure."

Cleverly had she switched the talk over from business to theatre and the touch of her hand on his fired him. He went to the Queen's Theatre again that night and had not the skill to detect the incompetence of her acting. Beautiful she was, dignified and wholly a woman, but as a French lady of fashion her most devoted admirers in an accomplished company could say little for her.

"Dean doesn't want anybody who's clever in the part," they said . . . and later on, they asked:

"Who's that curly-haired fellow from Birmingham, who's hanging round Sara. Must have plenty of the brass or she wouldn't be wasting her time on him. Good-looking chap and as strong as a bull"—and at this they laughed aside and nobody carried the subject further.

Perhaps it was not so much the fascination of the charming "Emily Dixie" as the glamour of the theatre which really caught John and began his financial ruin.

He hung about the stage-door of the Queen's just as though he were still a boy at the 'Varsity; and when he found it the fashion to send inamoratas flowers, he bought stacks of roses, violets and gardenias and filled Emily's dressing-room with them.

In vain did his partner in Birmingham write and telegraph to suggest that this, that, or the other affair was urgent and that John must return immediately. He put off going as long as possible, and when he went, it was to spend a couple of days or so amid his crucibles and then to dash back headlong to London and present himself in the Inverness Terrace with apologies. Emily received him graciously after these absences, and was always careful to talk about their coming theatrical enterprise together.

"I hear the Watteau Theatre is to be vacant," she said more than once. John hoped that her heart was to be the same.

This desirable vacancy, as it turned out, was not declared until some three months had passed, and the hardly famous "Sara Fleury" had given place at the Queen's to another.

Emily then said that she was going down to Brighton to the "Old Ship" inn, and suggested that John should come too. Irving used to go down there in those days, and Toole the farce actor, and Joe Knight the dramatic critic of *The Times*, and they sat up until all hours of the morning telling absurd stories and displaying their undoubtedly pretty wit.

Emily, it may be, hoped that by so following them she would get another engagement; but if she had heard what the great Joe said about her, she would hardly have entertained such hopes.

"As cold as the ice in this soda-water," he said emphati-

cally. Irving thought it was hardly as bad as that, and Toole declared that she looked so very amorous that it was a wonder she did not marry all the magicians at once. Generally it was agreed that she was a charming woman, but too refined to play "passion" in a melodrama. "The wife of one husband at a time" was the common verdict.

John often wondered whether Emily really were passionate or no; but one night at Brighton something happened which definitely decided the question. It was an evening in June, and they had dined well (she drank champagne with a generous appetite), and after dinner they went for a stroll up towards the Black Rock, beyond which there lay the open downs and the cornfields.

A mild moon played upon the swell of a gentle sea, and there made golden lakes of light with black ships to speak of the ghost shapes of the deep. A warm breeze moved amid the scant trees of the once fashionable squares and gardens and the whole air came laden with ozone and its soft perfumes.

Naturally, lovers were abroad at such an hour, and many an arm went round many a waist and made no complaint of its girth. Emily watched these couples with a waxing interest and clung closer to John as they walked. When at last upon a bench of Sussex Square they came right upon a couple clasped in a fond embrace, the spectacle was too much for Emily Dixie, and she took John back to the "Old Ship" immediately.

There, to his great astonishment, she dragged him down upon her sofa and kissed him almost savagely as the young man upon the seat had been doing to the young lady who had responded in so kindly a way. Yet all the time she was doing this, Emily would interrupt her embraces to say: "Only my husband shall have my kisses; only my husband." And so often did she repeat it that John simply pushed her away at last and banged out of her room in a temper. What right

had she to play about with him like that. She was a married woman and *she knew*.

The end of it, of course, was quite obvious. Very calmly, the next morning, she told him that he could marry her when and where he liked, though she stipulated for an absolutely quiet wedding and no witnesses but her old friend Gregory Pendleton of Rugby, whom she had known since her childhood, and any man friend John desired to "see him through."

So swift was it all, such passion had she awakened in him when she had kissed him, that the bemused man, burning with desire of her, simply took the first train to Doctors Commons, obtained the special blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and with his only witness a tame old clergyman staying at the "Ship," he duly led Emily to the altar of St. Paul's church—the first of those famous "High Churches" built by the generosity of Father Wagner—and there she promised to love, honour and obey him, and indirectly to suggest that the sooner he began to make love to her the better.

Sometimes he thought it all very mysterious and could not quite make it out. Her anxiety for secrecy was quite beyond that of the woman who dislikes publicity, and does not desire a crowd to witness her submission to the embraces of a man—a laudable position, since Christian marriage is commonly a very coarse affair and the Prayer Book service worthy of an age of rape by capture.

But in Emily's case, her anxiety was more than this.

"Not a word to anybody until I give you leave," she said again and again; "I have my reasons and they are good. Some day I will tell you. Don't ask me yet. Even in London, John, I want as few people as possible to know about it—you'll understand all right when I can tell you. Meanwhile, we'll just make love to each other and run our theatre. Darling, you do love me, don't you—

as I love you? I'm mad, mad, mad in your beautiful arms."

John did his best, but there were many new doubts and anxieties in his life—and sometimes, lying awake at night, dreadful forebodings came to him.

What if he woke up one day and found himself penniless?

He went hot and cold at the mere thought.

John, who loved money so much!

CHAPTER XXI

THE THEATRE IS TAKEN

The Watteau Theatre, as everybody knows, is one of the smallest in London, and in mid-Victorian days it was considered one of the prettiest and the naughtiest.

There, perhaps, for the first time in the story of the London theatre, a woman took off her clothes upon the stage and then put them on again—a pretty night-dress to wit with any amount of fine lace upon it and pink bows down the front.

Unhappily, for the complete content of the many old gentlemen in the stalls, the lady in question was compelled by an exigent Lord Chamberlain to wear tights throughout the proceeding—a stipulation which added to the joy neither of youth nor age.

John got the theatre at a rental of £20 a week, a considerable sum for those days, and from France he purchased the rights of one of the lightest of Offenbach's light operas. They gave it the name of "Leonora" in English, and Emily declared that she had been born and bred to take off night-dresses.

"You've never heard me sing and you don't know anything about it," was her retort to John when he expressed a mild doubt about her capacity in that direction—and, indeed to hear her talk, you would have thought that all the masters of Milan had given her lessons in voice production.

As a matter of fact, the village organist had taught her all the music she knew—and that was little enough.

"We must have good-looking chorus girls, of course," she insisted, "but not too many of them. Men like good legs and we must find them. Sixteen or eighteen instruments ought to be enough in the band with such light music as this, and Johnny Farrell will come from the Alhambra and arrange the dancing. I think, also, you should try and get Walker Waird, who's been playing with Irving. The man is really funny even if he never remembers a line of his part."

John brightened up at the idea of a funny man, for the rest of the talk he found rather depressing.

"I remember old Waird," he admitted pleasantly, "the man who ought to have given his son a pistol to commit suicide in the second act of 'The Lyons Mail.' On the first night he searched his pockets before the audience and then said: 'Left the pistol at home, by gad.' A great laugh that. Have old Waird by all means, and that pretty little dark-eyed girl we saw at the Alhambra the other night. She'd be a drawer, I'll bet."

Emily lifted her eyebrows a little at the enthusiasm with which this last idea was expressed, but she made no other comment.

Neither of them knew very much about the pounds, shillings and pence of the theatre, and when they engaged a certain Arthur Fenn to manage the show for them, they had not the slightest idea that he had robbed his last employer of two thousand six hundred pounds. So they began rather badly, and from that condition passed rapidly to a worse. Emily, however, thought nothing of the money.

"I've twenty thousand pounds," she averred, "and you must have fifty. With any luck this theatre will bring us in at least ten thousand a year."

Alas, they had no luck.

The first night of "Leonora" was a dreadful failure and succeeding nights did not repair the mischief. When Emily

obligingly put on her night-dress and showed her beautiful figure to the people, the gallery made rude noises with its mouth, and an impudent youth asked audibly, if her mother knew she was out. The critics in their turn, said that the episode was lamentably vulgar, and one wit added that something else beside night-dresses must be taken off to save such a piece—and that was the piece itself.

So the thing had to go, though Emily insisted upon singing and dancing for a good six weeks, and she discovered any number of "old friends" who sent her flowers and hung about her dressing-room and generally behaved as though John were negligible.

Indeed, she never introduced him to anybody as "her husband"; and when he demurred to this irregularity, she would suggest that it was "better so" and that nobody in the theatre cared much for husbands. Not only this, but she encouraged him rather pointedly to flirt with the little black-eyed lady from the Alhambra and assured him on more than one occasion that she was not jealous.

John, a simple sort of fellow, was rather perplexed by all this, but "perplexity" was hardly the word to apply to his business affairs. Things grew worse and worse in Birmingham. He was rarely there and his young partner, Geoffrey Marthan, nephew of that old Marthan who had sold the partnership, began to wonder why a business should be ruined because a man had gone mad about the theatre, and boldly decided to tell John what he thought about it.

"You've had control of everything," he wrote to John, "and a pretty mess you've made of it. We owe the bank fifteen thousand pounds, and that loan isn't going to be the last we shall want by a long way. Either you come back and act like a reasonable man or I am going to court for a liquidation. The present state of things cannot continue and I mean to see that it *does not*. So you can take this for a warning and answer 'Yes' or 'No' as you please."

Poor John—and the fifty thousand pounds which Emily credited him. He lost nearly six thousand by "Leonora," and as though that were not enough, his beautiful wife was stricken by a sudden fever of tragedy and determined to put on an adaptation of one of Sardou's most difficult dramas, *Patrie*.

The play was all literary blood and thunder, women beating on doors in order to save lovers from the burning, screams and scaffolds and horrible stakes—yet brilliant dramatically as it all was, even Paris did not like it, and the divine Sarah Bernhardt could make little of it. Nevertheless, Emily attacked it boldly, ranted and raved her bravest, and clearly demonstrated that if passion could do the trick, that trick was already done.

"We shall get there if we keep it on long enough, John dear," she urged in her sweetest tones, "you know it took Mr. Irving quite a long time to make his name in 'The Bells,' and even Miss Terry had to work hard for her success. We've only played for a month yet, and how can you expect all London to know about it? Give it another three or four weeks, dear, and then we can tell."

Of course he had to say, "Yes," and to pay up another three hundred pounds for the week's losses on the theatre. Production had cost him two thousand, and there seemed but little chance of ever getting that money back. Nor was this his only trouble, for he began to be "right down" anxious about Emily. There was a man in the north, a Sir Patrick Connolly, who always seemed to have an important engagement in London at this time and was hardly out of Emily's dressing-room except when she was actually changing her dress. She, in turn, turned it off with an account of the man's riches.

"My dear," she would exclaim in almost pathetic apology, "he's worth half a million of money if he's worth a penny. Don't you see that he'll back us when the time comes. Why,

with any luck, I might get five thousand out of him. Oh, John, you couldn't be jealous of a man like that. He's all beard and teeth like a walrus. No dear, if I want a lover it won't be Sir Patrick Connolly."

John said he hoped not but he was far from reassured. He was going to Birmingham, however, that day to have it out with his anxious partner and so nothing could be done. But he left London with a heavy heart and a deep sense of foreboding. Emily was the most passionate woman he had ever met in the course of his life and he feared for her. But even this "frailty of her human nature," as the Prayer Book would have it, was no excuse for the wild course upon which she appeared to be embarking.

John had all the ideas of his age concerning woman's honour and man's prerogative and all that kind of thing; and his blood boiled at the mere suggestion of this woman's infidelity. He could even remember sometimes, and with chagrin, her "lightness" as a child and the familiarity she had permitted him when he hardly knew her and she was already engaged to another man.

"Good God," he would cry; "if I have married a strumpet."

There were days when he was quite convinced that he had.

We find him, then, in a sad mood when he arrived in Birmingham and met his partner.

The latter was a jolly, outspoken young man, and actually three years older than John and double his age in wisdom and sagacity. He was quite frank about the matter and put his cards on the table without apology.

"Look here, old man," he said, "you've been caught in this theatre game and you're just going to the devil. I don't see any reason why I should go that way with you; and so it comes to this, one of us goes out of this business and we don't lose much time about the sortie. I'll give you what you

gave for the partnership and that's more than most men would do. Two thousand pounds—and if you care to start a foundry anywhere else than in Birmingham, you're quite at liberty to do so."

It was a terrible shock to John and he remembered again, and a little wistfully, the fifty thousand pounds with which Emily had credited him. Two thousand sovereigns would not go very far if there were many more productions of plays like *Patrie*, nor, should the theatre fail him, did he know how he would earn a living or by what profession. Indeed, his whole life now appeared to be menaced by misfortune and almost in despair he remembered the continued existence of his aunt at Wichfield Castle and hazarded a visit to that avuncular domain.

He found the stately Helen, grown a good deal older, and the pathetic Earl, as silly and impossible as ever.

The Bishop of Wichfield was staying in the house and also the Right Honourable Corbay Bell, a sleek under-secretary for Foreign Affairs, whose bias towards the first person plural was incurable, and who told anybody who would listen to him just what "we" had said to France, and how "we" had talked pretty plainly to Bismarck . . . this and other confidences about dear Queen Victoria and her liking for Scotsmen and the difficulties "she" created for "us" by remaining so persistently away from London and making a mausoleum of Buckingham Palace. The advent among such people as these of a relative whose wife was a "play-actress" naturally was embarrassing.

"I told you the money would be wasted," said the Earl as he sat with his wife in her pretty Japanese boudoir and worked upon a crude drawing for a mosaic in coloured glass —"the fellow's worse than ever with his talk of 'prompt sides' and 'battens' and Emily this, and Clara that, and all the vulgarities in the world. Most unfortunate that he should have come just when the bishop is here. Rollesby

thinks the theatre is the devil. He would not allow even Shakespeare to be read in his class when he was master at Harrow."

Helen said that she "supposed not," though why she supposed it, she did not explain. By no means, however, was she so simple as that remark would seem to have implied.

"I noticed that he asked at dinner a lot of questions about theatrical women—rather strange, perhaps, was it not?"

The Earl smiled—he always looked a little like the devil when he did that, men said, and his hatchet face became less attractive than ever.

"Pure episcopal curiosity, my dear. You should have heard him after dinner when you had gone. No doubt he would like to preach about it again. Really, it is a little hard even for a holy man, with a wonderful palate, to declare that the ladies of a certain profession are all prostitutes. How can he know that?"

Helen declared that, obviously, he could not. John, however, was her chief anxiety and she spoke of him and his future very freely.

"He's been turned out of his business, that's evident," she said; "did you hear his suggestion that it was a vulgar trade and so inartistic! I wonder where art comes in with this woman who caught him! Molly Serby, who saw her in London, tells me she looks just like a street-walker and plays like one. Why, actually, she took all her clothes off before the audience——"

"And the bishop not there," observed the Earl dryly.

Helen ignored that.

"She says she's the wife of a Captain Morton who was in the Queen's Own. I asked Colonel Otley about it—he was adjutant to the second battalion once—and he tells me that this Morton was quite a good officer until he took to drink in Dublin and was almost drummed out. He exchanged into a Sikh regiment and that's the last they heard of him. He

must have died in India—she couldn't have committed bigamy with John!"

The Earl saw no particular reason why such a woman should not—indeed, he appeared to think it was a common practice in the theatre.

"They all live together like rabbits in a warren," he declared, "you can see how our noble nephew has been tarred with the same brush. What right had he to tell the bishop that Avenbury was living with Nellie Long—the pantomime girl? Is there to be no privacy in our lives, then?"

"My dear, I hope you don't sympathize with that kind of privacy——"

Wichfield protested as one hurt.

"You know that I do not. The sanctity of the family life has been upheld by me whenever I have spoken on a religious platform. I am thinking of an association of vulgar ideas. Do you know that when you had retired, the young man actually suggested to the bishop that all the Fellows of a college at Oxford kept women in a little street near the Parks. That I call the most outrageous piece of vulgarity I ever heard—there's brass in that if you like."

Helen shook her head sadly.

"I dread a scandal," she confessed, "anything but that. If he divorces this woman, and by all accounts he must divorce her sooner or later, our names will be everywhere—and what then? What shall I say to the dear Queen if I go north with her in the autumn? It's really outrageous that John Blake should have brought such a son into the world."

"My dear, his father also was a brassfounder. And, don't forget, there were some rather odd ladies in his story before he married your sister."

Helen was silent at that and the lunch-gong sounding at the moment, they went down to the little dining-room—

the great banqueting hall of the Castle was rarely used except for hunt balls—and there they met the Bishop and talked roses. In this John joined heartily, calculating the money spent annually upon sending flowers to ballet girls and the false economics of the habit.

"A strange man," the Earl observed afterwards to his friend Corbay Bell, "as mean as the devil, yet ruined by a clever whore. Well, he's not the first of his breed and certainly he will not be the last."

John left them next morning to return to London, so the question of his meanness did not trouble them again.

It was a day of later April and for the first time perhaps, in all his life this very methodical and very gullible fellow perceived the beauty of his native county of Warwickshire. How sweet was the scent of the wide-flung woods, the May in all the prettiness of its virginity; laburnum and lilac the graceful maidens of many a grove; the oaks hiding their great boughs with a flutter of new green coats; elms to make arches above verdant alleys and such a song and chattering of birds that this might have been the day of Creation when millions of young eyes looked upon the sun for the first time. John surveyed it all with the sorrow of Esau. Boabdil flying from the Spaniards could not more truly have mourned a lost heritage.

"My father's fault," he said to himself bitterly, "I ought to be a Squire here with hounds of my own and a fine roof over my head. *His* father left him with money enough and what did he do with it? Spent it covering women's arms with jewellery and their backs with furs. Oh, hell, it's always the women. They'll take your last shilling and when it's spent, you may go to the devil. Perhaps I haven't been any better than my dad and oughtn't to think about it. He was a dear old man and, damn it, I suppose we're all just as helpless when a woman gets her arms round us. Ruined I am and no mistake about it. Good God, who'd have

thought it a year ago—the foundry in full blast and ten thousand pounds in the bank. Spend, why Emily would dry up the Bank of England. And what have I got for it —what, what? I don't even know that she's faithful to me. Look at her goings on with Connolly. Are those innocent or what are they? He's just paid another two thousand into the bank to keep the play going! Was that for love of me or of her? Damned if I know what to think of it."

The mood of suspicion followed him thus almost from the moment he left the gates of the Castle until the train drew up at Euston. What were Emily's relations with Sir Patrick Connolly; and why did that exceedingly rich man interest himself in a twopenny-halfpenny financial adventure at a London theatre? John would have given a great deal to find that out: but as it turned out he had not long to wait. Indeed, he was to discover it that very day.

Some impulse, good or bad, took him, not to their little house in Mayfair, but straight to the Watteau Theatre in Soho.

He was anxious to find out just how they had been doing in his absence, and although he was not very successful in that, he became acquainted with other facts of more moment. The box-office keeper certainly did tell him that they had bookings only for three pounds fifteen shillings for the evening performance and of that sum, three pounds were accounted for by a box for Sir Patrick.

"Public doesn't seem to like it, sir," he said, "rather too gruesome for them, I think. We should try a farce here, in my opinion. One like Mr. Wyndham's playing at the Criterion. There's a clever man now, if you like. The public wants something a little daring—you could buy a play in Paris, sir, if you went over. It couldn't do worse business than we are doing here."

John said "Thank you" or its equivalent and went round

to the stage-door where, by the merest accident he met old Martha, his wife's dresser, who clutched him, as it were, with both hands and poured a sorry tale into his ears.

"If somebody doesn't see to the water-pipes in your lady's room, sir, she won't have a shoe or stocking to her back and that's as true as the Lord's above me. Thankful I am that you have come yourself, for that Mr. Fenn—he's no good to nobody. Talk and talk he do but not a shilling for anybody or anythink. Now you please to come along with me and then ask yourself if it's right or proper that a lady should have her shoes full of water, and, for all I know rats in 'em as well. If you will please to come, Mr. Blake."

John *was* pleased to come and they entered Emily's dressing-room together. The pipes certainly were rather watery and the wall disclosed mosaics which were not mediæval. John listened patiently while Martha pointed out to him the obvious fact that "somethink was a leakin' somewheres" and that no scene of the Flood had been staged in *Patrie*. Of course he would see to it—and when he had said it, his eyes roved round the room and upon my lady's table he discerned an envelope the handwriting of which he knew too well. That fellow Patrick Connolly, then, had been writing to Emily again. And the very fact of his writing at all had been always denied by her.

John sat down before the disordered dressing-table, and telling old Martha that she might go, he began to recall all the suspicious happenings of the last two months and to suffer, as jealous men will, that fever of anger and doubt, which has troubled many a lover who believes that he has been betrayed. Neither tradition of confidence nor the common justice of the spoken accusation restrained him when in such a mood, and his rapid search for real evidence was wholly malignant in its thoroughness. Every unlocked drawer he turned out, and two that were locked he forced with a stout key from his own bunch and a short steel knife from the dressing-room.

He would know the worst, he said. The hour of self-delusion was over.

In the first of the drawers he found photographs, chiefly of Emily in the bathing-dress she had worn last summer at Brighton. Connolly was there also and he was as lightly clad as she. The words on the back of his picture conveyed a message into which a debauched woman could write much. But no name was mentioned—the fellow was too cunning for that. It needed the frank epistle of the second drawer to enlighten John fully. A plainer or more disgusting avowal was never written by the most profligate of men. It made it clear beyond dispute that there could be no longer a question of her infidelity.

John hardly knew what he was doing from the moment he read that outrageous avowal until he arrived at his house in Clarges Street. Rage, shame, despair—he suffered every feverish emotion that betrayal may excite; and there was no resolution common to cuckolds which he did not take. He would strangle this woman, shoot the man dead, sell every stick in the house and clear off to America. Anger shook him like a palsy. His hands were clenched, his eyes staring, when at last he entered that little house which, ironically, he had called his home.

She was not in, the servant said; gone out with a gentleman. Was it Sir Patrick Connolly? The girl blushed and said she really did not know. John saw that she was lying and did not push the matter further. Curiosity had become a kind of madness with him. He went from room to room with heavy step, ransacked cupboards and wardrobes, turned the contents of her drawers upon the floor, read and re-read letters, found nothing and became the more angry because of his failure.

"The artful whore!" She knew how to destroy things. She had never imagined a possible visit to her dressing-room.

These were his deeds and thoughts when there came a

loud knocking upon the front door of the house and then the continued ringing of the bell. John paused in his work to listen and so heard a strange voice asking if "Mrs. Morton" lived here. To this the girl replied that no such name was known there, whereupon the stranger laughed in an odd kind of way and, pushing his way into the hall, declared that he was going to wait, anyway.

"She's here all right," the voice said, "no good trying it on with me. I'm coming in, Connie. I'm going to wait for her—see, I'm her husband, my beauty, so don't you try any of your damned nonsense on me. I'm not the sort, ducky, to stand it—not by a long way——"

John went down the stairs three at a time. He met the man just as he was entering the little dining-room and so they stood face to face.

He was terribly changed, this Kenneth Morton, grown twenty years older by the look of him and as thin and haggard as a phantom of the spectre looks. Suffering rather than drink was marked in his face, though either could have been named as the cause of his physical downfall. Even while he talked to John his hands trembled, though it was not from anger. He had expected to find his wife with a man, so well he knew her, but towards the particular man he felt no malice, though malignity gave him pleasure at the confusion and perhaps dismay, which might attend his resurrection.

John was the first to speak. He might have asked: "Who the hell are you?" as perhaps most men would have done; but he had the brains to put off all pretence and to go to the truth of the situation without subterfuge.

"I know you," he said quietly; "you are Ken Morton, Emily's husband."

"I am that, sir, and you, I remember, are John Blake who knew my wife in Warwickshire. Well, and what may you be doing here?"

"She married me," rejoined John with amazing self-control, "married me nearly a year ago. She said you died in India—she lied, it seems."

"Did she ever do anything else? Lied, man, from the first week I knew her. We hadn't been married six months when she was on with an ensign! But married—that's new, that's beyond what I expected even of Emily Dixie's nerve."

John persisted—oddly enough trying to defend her now.

"She told me that the district inspector at Shawarar reported your death himself and declared that your body could not be found because of the early snow in the hills. I don't believe she would have let me marry her if she hadn't been convinced it was true. What object could have been served? She isn't the kind of woman who would take the risk of going to prison——"

"She certainly isn't, though she'll do most things . . . but give us a brandy-and-soda, old man, will you? I'm as dry as the Gobi desert . . . and I'll have a few kind things to say to her when she comes in. She is coming in, I suppose? She hasn't just stepped out to avoid her dear husband who's travelled so far to see her?"

"I can't tell you. I've been in Birmingham for some days. She's been away since yesterday morning—I believe with a man. You know her well enough to understand that she would hardly go alone!"

Morton laughed heartily at that. He also drank a long brandy-and-soda at a draught and appeared to invite another. There was no pretence about him and any talk of his "honour" as far as it concerned Emily Dixie would merely have amused him.

"Yes, I know her and so do you," he confessed presently; "poor thing, she was born that way and so she'll die. Perhaps she was right to think I was dead since everybody at Peshawar thought the same. But, old boy, I had

gone north to do what nobody else has ever done and that was to get to Lhassa. Of course I didn't get there. I was six months in a filthy prison and if there's any kind of torture a man can suffer short of death, that they put me through. It was an Afghan woman who got me away in the end, but that isn't the story. Look where they burned me with hot irons! My God, what I've suffered, what I have suffered!"

He threw off his coat and waistcoat and showed his scarred breast. Fire had burned mystic signs upon it and right round his neck was the red blood of an old knife wound, when they had threatened to behead him but had merely skinned the flesh. The man shuddered when he touched these hurts. John, in his turn, came near to fainting.

"I'm sorry—I'm most dreadfully sorry," he stammered, and then, beginning to pace up and down the room, he tried to gather up the tangled threads of this strange dilemma.

"Emily's on the stage," he said; "perhaps you know that?"

"I do. It was her picture outside the Watteau Theatre that brought me here. I only landed in England five days ago and might not have found her for six months, I suppose, if it hadn't been for that picture—is she making money? She couldn't act for beans when she played amateurs at Karachi."

"And she can't act now," admitted John with candour, "we've lost thousands there. I'm damned near ruined and that's a fact."

"But you're still running the theatre——"

"The last week as far as I am concerned. You and Emily can do what you please. Of course—you'll take her away, I suppose. There won't be any law nonsense or that kind of thing. Of course, you

wouldn't have a chance in a law court after the district inspector's letter. She was quite right to accept that."

"I know it, my boy. And I don't suppose for a moment she'll want to come and live with me. If ever two people really hated each other, we're the pair. I'll divorce her if you'll make it worth my while. You don't want to break up your home and that kind of thing, I imagine. Well, let the pair of you pay me something and you can do just what you damn well like."

It was John's turn not to laugh but to smile.

"That's an obliging offer but unfortunately it comes too late. This afternoon, I came upon evidence which would divorce her three times over. An hour ago, I came home determined to turn her into the streets and to sell every stick in the place. Now, here you are and it's for you to say—I'll clear out if you like and leave you to it. But I warn you that, so far as I am concerned, everything here will be in the brokers' hands in a week and the theatre will be closed."

Morton appeared somewhat staggered by this and quite at a loss how to answer it. He had made up his mind to divorce the woman and, mentally, he had quoted a price of a couple of thousand pounds for the sale and barter of this much-desired lady.

Now, he saw himself confronted by the alternative, either of continuing in that state of marriage beloved of the bishops or of paying for his freedom. To the latter he was indifferent but the money troubled him. Yet, after all, she might offer him a home and that was something. Old Patrick, her lover, would have to keep the pair of them it appeared.

These thoughts flashed quickly through his mind, but naturally they were not expressed in words.

Indeed, he was still debating his answer when the two men heard the latchkey turn in the door of the little hall

and immediately upon that the voice of Emily herself asking in surprised tones if she really understood what the maid, who met her upon the threshold and was almost hysterical with excitement, had told her.

"Who is it, do you say?"

A pause and then a low, almost defiant laugh.

"My good girl, have you been drinking?"

The door of the dining-room was flung wide open upon the words and Emily Morton strode in to confront her husband.

She did not faint, she made no scene. For months now, some strange foreboding had suggested to her that this man was alive.

"So it's you," she said with a shrug of her pretty shoulders.

And then she sank into a chair and was overtaken by a fit of hysterical laughter which all her sang-froid could not control.

CHAPTER XXII

SOPHIE COMES TO EUROPE

SOPHIE changed her mind about coming to Europe, and she was confined at the house of William Hart-Brown, her brother-in-law, whose practice in Boston was flourishing and whose kindness to her beyond expectation.

Not a lawyer himself, the doctor knew many lawyers; and his honest mind was inflamed by a just anger when he heard all her story and a blatant press reiterated it in strident type and with a detail which disgusted.

Of course, as he put it to her, a divorce would readily be obtained and if the man appeared to defend himself, it was quite possible that some outraged member of his flock would oblige by shooting him on sight. George Washington Addy, however, was far too shrewd a rogue to run any such risk, and perceiving that his chances of obtaining Sophie's money were nil, he made a leisured voyage to the Sandwich Islands and there upon sandy beaches demonstrated his gospel to amorous ladies, regardless of their colour.

Sophie resumed her name of Hart-Brown, as she had every right to do and presently she became the mother of a fine girl and all her conceptions of life and living were instantly changed.

What a miracle was this creation of a human soul! What a gift to her from the great void which the priests peopled with divinities and angels!

Herself lying in her own arms and crooning in a tongue which she had brought with her from the heaven of mystery.

Just life nestling close to life and death glowering behind the curtain of the night. And all the child's future in the mother's keeping—eyes to be opened to human ways, to the facts of virtues and of vice; the rose bush to be so cherished that the blossoms would be beautiful. Sophie could tremble already with the burden of her responsibility.

What difficult years lay before her! And her own secrets!

How, if some day some man dared to tell this little daughter of hers that the mother might have been charged with murder—or that a French adventurer had betrayed her when she was little more than a schoolgirl. There were ghosts already rattling their fetters, surely. None the less she clung passionately to the child; and in some moods could tell herself that now, for the first time, a great love had come to her. No man had caused her heart to beat as this babe could do. She would have been willing to die for it while it was yet in swaddling clothes.

Some have wondered why, all the circumstances being considered, she ever came back to England at all.

The answer to the riddle lay in that hunger for the homeland which neither danger nor difficulty could satisfy.

Her dreams were of the woodlands of Warwickshire; the greenwood tree came into her visions of sweet arbours and sylvan glades; she longed for the fragrant blossoms of ancient gardens; for the roses of her childhood's home—for all the peace and the solitude of England's forest land; for the very music of those church bells which so rarely had awakened any religious response in a mind given to rationalism.

When the years began to roll by more swiftly, this call became irresistible. She wrote to her cousin Lucy in the end and announced that she would be visiting England in a month's time. The child was four and a half years old by that time—already the very image of the mother who adored her.

She had been christened "Sophie," of course; and the good doctor stood for godfather.

He disliked the idea of this journey to England and hoped that she would soon return.

"Come to me if they're unkind to you, my dear, and always look upon this house as your home."

In turn, Sophie suggested that people would "surely forget some day," though she doubted it. That father of hers would not forgive an angel on his deathbed. Her cousin, Lucy, had become so dreadfully respectable that even her pew was dusted at the parish church.

Lucy had but one gospel of life. The code of the army was the adamantine rule for her; and this despite the fact that Freddy Wharton had come into a lot of money and was no longer a soldier. Indeed, he had become a squire and magistrate in the neighbourhood of Stratford-on-Avon and his interest in Shakespeare and in cases of common assault among the rural population was an unfailing antidote to the monotony of country life.

Even upon the bench, he had been heard to say: "To be or not to be, that is the what-d'ye-call-it"; and such judgments were handsomely applauded by a gaping populace.

Sophie's passage to England—it was made in the merry month of May—should have been one of sunshine and gladness; but destiny decreed it otherwise.

She sailed in the ill-fated ship the *Boston*, and, as the history of these years has told us, the vessel was burned in mid-Atlantic and two hundred and seventy souls were lost.

Her own life was saved by a shrewd financier named Riotti, who dealt not only in money but in spirits. They were at the same table in the cabin—the ship was one of three thousand five hundred tons, a great vessel for those days—and the old man took a great fancy to the pretty "widow" and, like many another amorous old gentleman, metaphorically pressed the babe to his heart though he hated

the sight of it. Then he became confidential; and one night, when they paced the deck in the moonlight, he spoke of the "omens."

"Don't read the stars, I suppose?" he asked her. Sophie agreed that she did not.

"You ought to, my dear. We've got to live among 'em millions of years when we're dead here and they ought to have a message for you. I believe in that kind of thing, you know. I'm as sure that voices speak to me from the dead as I am that I'm talking to you now."

Sophie said that she hoped they had pleasant messages for him. She thought it great nonsense, but she liked the old gentleman and suffered him.

"Sometimes they're pleasant and sometimes not," he persisted in his matter-of-fact way; "I've talked with angels and I've talked with devils. Of course, what the parsons preach is all bunkum. They ask us to believe in eternal life, and when we try to get proofs of it, they say we are deluded fools and not in our right senses. I know eternal life's true and that makes me indifferent about this. If you said this ship was going to the bottom to-night, I should care no more than if you told me that to-morrow would be a fine day——"

"But you don't think it is going to the bottom," exclaimed Sophie in some alarm. She thought of her child at once and, for an instant, the old man thoroughly frightened her. For his part, he was not reassuring and she slept but ill that night.

"You never know, my dear. Here we are a thousand miles from dry land and nothing but a bit of old iron between us and the stars. Well, if it happens, it happens. Something told me not to sail on this ship and yet here I am, and the sea's calm and the moon is shining on us and I have a beautiful woman by my side. What more can any man want?"

She did not know, but she met him with apprehension on the following evening and his attitude was even more disquieting. That he had an evil premonition about the end of the voyage was no longer to be doubted. She perceived, moreover, that he was thinking of her even more than himself.

"Whenever I get on a ship," he said—they were again walking on the upper deck, though hazy clouds forbade the moon to shine upon them—"I always take a look round and ask myself what I should do if any accident happened. It's just an amusement, of course, and, thank God, it's never been of any use to me. But it might be, you know. Now take this very steamer. It's clear that we haven't boats enough for half the passengers if there were trouble and most of us would be drowned like rats. I shouldn't be, perhaps, because I've made it my business to go spying about, and I know that up for'ard there they have stowed a number of hencoops which would float like rafts if the worst came about. A silly idea, you say, but who knows? And shouldn't we be pleased with it if the hundredth chance came off and we had to take to the water?"

He said it all as though tossed between the ideas of jest and reality, and Sophie, dreading the very thought of disaster to the child, must try to believe that, after all, it was but a "might be" and "might be's" were just as foolish afloat as ashore. So, when he asked her if she really had enough confidence in one Henry Riotti to trust herself to him should any emergency arise, she answered quite truly that she knew nobody to whom she would do so more willingly.

"I am very much alone in the world, really," she confessed with that unspoken appeal for sympathy women know so well how to make to elderly gentlemen; "except for my brother-in-law in Boston and his wife, I hardly know a soul in the world to whom I could turn if I were in trouble.

And yet I've been married twice—would you believe that if I hadn't told you?"

Henry Riotti, who had made no endeavour at all to flirt with her, though obviously he admired so pretty a woman very much, hastened to declare that there was nothing surprising in the fact and that, if she wanted them, she could have twenty husbands or more. Thus, the solemnity of the prophet gave place to the somewhat childish humour of the aged, and when they had parted in the saloon an hour later he was still telling her stories that Hadji Baba might have heard and she was still pretending to laugh at them.

Two days later, almost at the same hour, the alarm ran round the ship that there was fire in the aft holds; and the bells having summoned the men to the pumps and the engineers having taken charge, the passengers were all assembled on the upper deck and the boats were swung free in the davits. It was a calm night and once more there was moonshine on the waters. Death came thus in phantom radiance and his wings were of silver.

Sophie had just begun to undress when the alarm was raised and she could describe her sensations only in the ancient phrase that "something seemed to grip her heart and then almost to paralyse her brain."

Almost mockingly, a voice whispered: "He was right then, that mad old gentleman was right."

The ship was doomed and here, this night, all hope, all fear must be left for ever behind her. There was an instant when she clutched her little girl almost madly, smothered the round and chubby face with kisses and then hugged the child to her as though neither God nor devil should snatch it from her. Anon, she became calmer and answered the awakened child quite rationally.

"It's all right, darling—mother's here. Don't you be frightened, my dearest. I shan't leave you—we're going on

deck—just because the sailors are doing something to the ship. There, there, don't cry, Sophie—now do not cry, I tell you. Am I not here with you—what have you got to fear, then?"

Her tone changed to one of authority and the little girl fell to an awed silence. She had awakened with great round and sleepy eyes and the shock of awaking moved her for a moment to terror. But wonder succeeded; and although instinct can tell even the youngest children where there is "something wrong," confidence equally may master that realization and leave content behind it.

Little Sophie was quite happy to lie in the arms of the big Sophie and to wait upon events. A heavy shawl and the coverlet of the bed were about her in addition to the clothes in which her mother had so swiftly dressed her. She could see the flames of the fire while they climbed to the upper deck and the spectacle did not terrify her. "Is it fireworks, mummy?" she asked. How much would not Sophie have given if the answer could have been in the affirmative!

Riotti was upon the boat deck when she reached it and he had been awaiting her with impatience.

"Stand by me," he said a little sternly; "keep your mouth shut. There's going to be terrible trouble here presently. Half these poor devils must drown. There's nothing can save the ship now. My God, what heat! My hair is almost scorched already. Draw that shawl over the child's face, but mind the sparks. We're burning like a tar barrel. They'd no right to carry such stuff with passengers. Oil, I'm told, and a lot of their crazy American furniture. Good God, it's criminal. Now, this is the place and here are the coops. I've got one of the cabin boys in with us and he's gone to find ropes. I shall push off directly he comes or they'll see us and join in. Keep by me and don't lose your courage. Think of the child—that's what you must do——"

Sophie said "Yes, yes" in answer to him, though she hardly knew what she said. There is tragedy which begets maddening fear, and tragedy which, by reason of its magnitude, begets mere stupefaction.

Sophie stood there as one who could apprehend the terrible facts of the situation but not its magnitude.

A fire, yes. Great ugly flames roaring up from the aft holds; forked tongues which licked the rigging and were blown this way and that, sometimes towards the bridge, or again towards the west—so that they scorched already the shrieking men and women who were herded helplessly right aft, whither the officers had foolishly marshalled them.

Most of the boats were there, as the explanation was given afterwards.

They lowered some of these and they were pushed off successfully, but many who had not the nerve to suffer the propinquity of the flames, leaped headlong into the sea and were rescued or swiftly drowned as their destiny decreed.

Sophie could not see all this as the fire flamed between her and the poor people. But she heard their cries . . . and curiously, she heard them with a sense of personal remoteness from the peril, in no way associating herself with its significance. She might, indeed, have been a spectator watching from afar some mighty conflagration and saying, with others: "Oh, I do hope they will save them!" And all the while she clutched the child, frantically with fingers of steel. "It's all right, darling"—she said it twenty times.

The cabin boy came presently with the ropes, a lusty youth who was to command a ship himself in the years to come. It was no great task for any sailor to get the great coop overboard or to make fast the ropes that held it. The boy was down on the roof of their crazy raft before a man could have counted twenty and crying up to them that the lady should follow. "Hand over hand, sir," he said,

"I'll steady her"—and at this Riotti took the child from Sophie's arms and bade her go. "I'll send her down with the rope—and follow afterwards," he explained briefly. It seemed the better way and she obeyed him blindly. The cold, the terror of it. The ocean robbing her of all that could give any meaning to her life!

The raft drifted slowly from the side of the burning ship, but the better thing was that it drifted unobserved. The boy had made "all fast," as he said, and the ropes he had brought bound them securely to the rude planking of the coop. Boats passed them in the shadows, but all so overladen that any thought of a refuge there occurred to none of them.

Meanwhile, there were scenes upon the deck of the ship which none would forget to his life's end—men, and women too, falling from the burning rigging to the devouring furnace below—people gone mad and running into the fire in their raving—others who threw themselves overboard and prayed for death. When the end came, it was quite sudden—at one moment a pyramid of flame above a still sea: at the next, supreme darkness and the echo of subdued voices—the saved afraid that those who were drowning would discover them; the masters of the boats stubbornly determined that they had room for no more if their own lives were to be saved.

All this was in the picture which the ghastly moments revealed to Sophie as she held the child close to her and defied death to cheat her. When darkness and silence ultimately came, they were as profound as though the maw of the great ocean had been satisfied and it would sleep.

"Six hundred miles from land," the young sailor thought. Riotti merely said: "We shall be saved. I have heard a voice which tells me so, and I am never deceived. See what the day will bring. Sunshine, my dear, I know it. The night has revealed it to me."

And the old gentleman—despite his grotesque supernaturalism—proved to be right after all.

A Swedish steamer sighted the raft at nine o'clock next morning and took the derelicts aboard. They were set down at Plymouth three days later and on the fourth day, Sophie was at Windsor, telling Father Arthur just what she had been doing and applauding his joyous determination to say a Mass of Thanksgiving because she had been saved.

Perhaps the oddest thing of them all was that, to the end of her life, she neither saw the man who had saved her life nor heard of him again.

CHAPTER XXIII

INCOGNITO IN LONDON

FATHER ARTHUR had changed a good deal since he was a humble parish priest at Quainton. His hair was now very grey and his face worn. The difficulties of the Church of England troubled him much and he had often thought of becoming a Catholic. From this, Gladstone's famous essay on "Vaticanism" had saved him.

"Not loyal to desert the English Church," was his gospel. It did not seem the best of reasons to Sophie, who was feminine and parochial.

Perhaps, at heart, she disliked all priests and parsons. Religion had done little enough for her, certainly, and she had ceased to believe in it. Arthur St. Just was rather her friend than her pastor. She pitied him, leading his ridiculous life as chaplain to a little community of nursing sisters, though she admitted the charity of their work.

"You ought to have been a bishop," she told him.

He replied with a smile that anything of that kind was a serious obstacle to salvation.

"I have my books and I have my friends," he admitted with feigned content. "Even the Public Worship Regulation Act cannot prevent the nightingale from singing. It is you about whom I am anxious, my dear. You, indeed, have been called upon to suffer—but you must forget it all now for the child's sake. Has she been baptized, by the way—I trust, indeed, that she has."

Sophie felt quite triumphant when she declared that his doubts were unnecessary.

"That dreadful man, George Addy, he didn't believe in baptism. But I did and, of course, I had her done. I told you that it was no marriage at all, didn't I? He had two wives living when he married me and had swindled people with new religions all over America. Was there ever a woman so treated by fortune as I have been? Hardly a day's happiness in all my life . . . and I could be so happy if life would let me. Look at my cousin, Lucy—oh, it isn't fair that things should be so unequal—it's cruel, cruel."

Lucy was still living near Stratford-on-Avon at that time, though Freddy Wharton had developed with the years a strange craze for new habitations and frequent shiftings of residence.

A very wealthy man, he had hunted indefatigably until he broke his leg over a famous Warwickshire "double"; and then had turned to shooting as the only alternative for a sportsman and a gentleman. Arthur St. Just was not quite sure that all his restlessness and impatience really contributed much to Lucy's well-being. Call nobody happy until he (or she) is dead. He remembered the adage, though he had forgotten the author.

"Perhaps Lucy has her troubles too," he suggested; "you know that I prepared the elder boy for Eton and saw a good deal of them at that time. Freddy talks about going to live near Bury St. Edmunds. I don't think Shakespeare will miss him, though the hunt may. He has too much money, Sophie, a great deal too much. And I fear he is quite without religion—just that public school stuff which believes in God when you win the cricket match. You should write to Lucy—I'm sure she'd be glad to see you."

"What's become of her lout of a brother, John? Has he made a fortune too? He was mean enough as a boy—I suppose he's more than thirty now, isn't he?"

Arthur St. Just shook his head.

"A bad fellow, I fear. He lost all his money in the London theatres and lived for some years with the wife of a soldier in India. He says they believed the husband to be dead, but I don't think many people were convinced. The fellow's in Norfolk now—they hope he'll stop there, for he's no good to anybody in this part of the world. Yes, you must see Lucy. It's quite time that the family recovered a little simple Christian charity. You owe it, my dear, to your little girl—for none can say that in the sight of God you were not George Addy's wife."

Sophie hated this kind of talk, which merely confirmed her paganism. Already she began to be sorry that she had come back to England at all. The very respectability of the national hypocrisy disgusted her. What a rich, prosperous, canting country it was! There were even slums in this royal town of Windsor where you could see children in rags and without shoes to their feet. She had never seen that in America.

She wrote, however, to Lucy as Father Arthur wished and received in reply just that evasive—"glad to see you but please don't come" kind of letter she had expected. Never again, she determined, would she so humiliate herself before such people. It was as obvious as ever that her dear relatives would much prefer to hear of Sophie Fordacre dead than of her living. The past was still their bogy—the Court Circular still their gospel.

So she made other plans and among them was a week, spent as it were, incognito in that great city of London.

It had changed a good deal since the days of her childhood, she thought, and suburbs had sprung up where hitherto there had been fields. Hampstead remained the pretty village she had known as a girl, but they were already cutting roads about the foot of the hill and some of the lovely groves of West End were already ruined.

In Kensington she saw fewer cabbages than formerly and some streets of mean villas were springing up in the neighbourhood of Earl's Court. Hammersmith and Chiswick, however, remained pretty hamlets and there were refreshingly green fields in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill. Sophie drove round all these places in a victoria she hired from Miltons' in Park Lane. She ate ices, too, at Gunters' in Berkeley Square and that truly did seem a link with her forgotten childhood.

As for the street traffic of the town, it had become very dense and it frightened her.

Countless vans drawn by great shire horses clattered on the stony pavements of the Euston and the Marylebone Roads and the bawling of the omnibus conductors sounded sometimes like the solicitations of the showmen at a country fair.

The beautiful carriages in Hyde Park, however, and the well-matched horses which drew them were, in her opinion, beyond anything either Paris or America could show. The English remained a nation of horse-lovers and port wine bibbers, and the poor man could still lie down in the gutter and sleep off the fumes of the strong beer which had intoxicated him, without suffering any more serious punishment than a fine of five shillings if a policeman discovered him.

Sophie stayed at a little hotel in Beaumont Street, Marylebone, and for the first five days of her visit she did not see one human being known to her.

Bravado and curiosity tempted her one night to drive right past her old home in Kensington and she was much disturbed to discover that straw had been spread before its door and that illness evidently was in the house. Was it her relentless father, or that cat of a foreign woman, his second wife, who had done her so much mischief?

Sophie hoped it was not her half-sister, but beyond that

she discovered that she really did not care. These people had treated her with obstinate and enduring malignity. There could never be forgiveness then even to the dying.

Later that night she went, being wholly without a reasonable objective, to Madame Tussaud's Exhibition, then a beautiful and most artistic little gallery of wax figures, some half-way down Baker Street.

There were very few people in the place, but one chattering group of foreigners passed from figure to figure with her, and presently it dawned upon her that a very smart woman of the company was staring at her curiously and seemingly trying to remember whether they had or had not met before. Sophie did not know the woman, though she had a vague feeling that they had seen each other somewhere. When, at last, the Frenchwoman approached her and spoke, she remembered all the circumstances immediately.

"A relative of Miss Lucy Blake, is it not? You came more than once to the school at Kensington when your cousin was there. I was then Adeline de la Haute Croix. I am now the Countess of Bornay—but I should have recognized you anywhere. You are not a day older."

Sophie liked the compliment. She liked also the woman's clothes, the *dernier cri* from *chez* Worth and of much elegance. It was astonishing how these few words in English that had the accent of Paris recalled all the excitements, and, it may be, the more dangerous adventures of those days when she had sought to forget the tragedy of her childhood and had so signally failed. What a sorry place was this England for a woman who really knew something of the art of life!

She told the Countess, of course, that she remembered her perfectly.

"Lucy is married now—an officer who has come into a large fortune—they have two children—yes, they live

at an old château near Stratford-on-Avon"—she liked to use the word château and inwardly was ashamed of the snobbery which trotted out all these qualities so unhesitatingly—"I myself am a widow—I have a child—no, I don't live anywhere permanently—just stopping at a little hotel near here."

"But you must come to Paris and see me, my dear. I positively insist. Why not come and stop a month—our hotel is 22 Chaussée Monceaux—come next Friday when I go back—yes, yes, that's the very thing. I shall take no excuse. Wait, I shall write it down—I am at the Bond's Hotel, Albemarle Street—come and see me there to-morrow. We will arrange everything—I am so fond of English women and, you are beautiful and Paris shall tell you so. So you will come—*bien entendu*, I will hear of no excuses."

The swift processes of the woman's thoughts intrigued Sophie and, while she gave merely a formal answer, she had by no means made up her mind what to do.

Evidently, this idea that she should be the guest of Adeline had come to that vivacious dame actually as a kind of inspiration during their disjointed conversation. Sophie knew women too well not to perceive that there was something behind it and that the invitation was unlikely to be altruistic. At the same time, she was perfectly well able to take care of herself, and if this Adeline really hoped to make use of her in any way not of her own choosing, well, it was not Sophie Hart-Brown who was likely to be disillusioned.

"I'll write to you," she rejoined quietly; "the difficulty is my little Sophie—I had thought of leaving her for a little while at a school here in London—if I do, well, perhaps I may. Of course it would be delightful to see Paris again—and with an old friend. So thank you very much."

It was quite true that she had thought of sending Sophie to a little school for well-born infants, recently opened in Beaumont Street and offering the great advantage of lessons

given under the trees of the Botanical Gardens in Regent's Park.

Two dear old dames ran the place as a house of infantile luxury—"and, after all," thought Sophie, "I shall never teach the child anything, religion least of all, and the sooner somebody else begins to do it the better."

That the child herself betrayed no abiding sorrow at being separated from her mother for a few short weeks did not flatter the maternal instinct, but was obvious.

"Shall I have my own book to draw in?" the little Sophie asked. The affirmative answer clinched her determination to go. It was now the month of June—in six weeks' time, they could go together to Boulogne or Etrétat for a long summer holiday—"for learn French she shall," was the mother's resolve and to it she clung tenaciously during the years to come.

Thus it came about that she accepted Adeline's invitation after all; and having deposited her little daughter in the arms of the Misses Barratt, both of whom kissed her at once and one of whom cried because she was so beautiful, she set off for the nine o'clock train, then running from Charing Cross, and met her excitable little friend of the old days, now become a famous dame in French society where she gave much scandal to the salons of the noble houses and much pleasure to divers gallants who readily pardoned her somewhat flagrant immoralities.

Adeline de Bornay—for such was now her title—was not pretty, but abounded in vivacity.

She was emphatically a brunette of a type rather Spanish than French and she could say more with her eyes in five minutes than most Englishwomen could in a year.

To Sophie, her welcome upon the platform was most tragically comic in the intensity of its visible emotions. How delighted she was; how enraptured! You would have thought that the pair had lived together for years . . . while,

as a matter of fact, they had not met more than half a dozen times in all their lives.

"So kind of you, my dear. *Mais comme vous êtes belle !* I have never nothing known to give me more pleasure. We will go everywhere, see everything—together, together. We will be schoolgirls once more. Oh, it is my joy, *chérie*, I have so much pleasure I cannot tell you properly"—and so on, and so on—in French occasionally and sometimes in English, which did little credit to the teaching of the Misses Fawks of Kensington, but was none the less pleasant for Sophie to hear.

"She's up to something," said that shrewd woman of the world. In half an hour she divined what it was.

"You know Colonel Harvey, *ma chérie*—Colonel Harvey who used to be in the Guards of Scotland but is now the great director in our French railways. Well, I am disappointed, for he was to be on the quai this morning about some business in which my husband and I have been much interested and here he is not; so that I must go to Paris and tell the Count and he will have a great disappointment. I am desolated."

And then, more brightly, and cheering up at the thought:

"But perhaps we shall find him at Folkestone, for these railway peoples go everywhere and you never know where they are or where they are not. Yes, yes; it must be that so I shall forget all about it until we get there and you shall tell me all your wonderful life and what you and little Lucy have been doing since those old days at the school when I was such a naughty girl and you were not so good that you made me ashamed——" and here she laughed as one who should say: "I am still the same Adeline and you, I hope, are the same Sophie Fordacre who were never too scrupulous when morality was in question."

Sophie avoided this issue, perhaps because she had learned never to give herself away and for a further reason that she

was not by any means sure that she could answer in the negative. Was her attitude to life really changed fundamentally? Frankly, she did not know.

The train rumbled down to Folkestone, taking nearly two hours upon the journey and there the little paddle-wheeled boat, *La France*, was waiting to carry the agitated passengers, who had such fears of the Channel passage and were quite prepared to be violently sick whatever the placidity of a commonly hostile sea. Adeline received a telegram directly she stepped on the boat and a perusal of it brought a cat-like vivacity to her eyes. "The something that was up," in Sophie's words, evidently was still in that state of elevation. Colonel Harvey was to meet them at Boulogne.

"But he cannot come until quite late and we must stop the night at the Pavilion Hotel, my dear. Wasn't it lucky I had our luggage registered to Boulogne only? I thought this might happen and now, *voilà*, it is with us. Well, we shall amuse ourselves very well and the colonel is sure to give us a most wonderful dinner—a *bon vivant*, Sophie, who knows more about cooking than anyone in Paris, although he is an Englishman. Afterwards we shall go to the Établissement and play *petits chevaux*. Oh, it will be great fun and to-morrow in Paris we shall forget to tell the people anything about it—*hein*. There is no necessity, is there, and then nobody will make the scandals of us."

The simple soul, thought Sophie.

Why did she not say straight out that she had an affair with this Colonel Harvey and that she was using her English friend as a cover?

Did the absent Count Bornay hear of this meeting, the Colonel would become the friend of Madame Sophie Hart-Brown and not of Adeline de Bornay. The most primitive story-teller could not have arranged it more artlessly; and some women, no doubt, would have been all sound and

fury at the mere suggestion of being made a "go-between." Sophie, however, merely smiled to herself. Nobody cared whether *she* met a man at Boulogne or, for that matter, twenty men. Her independence of the world's opinion was absolute—and if it would help this chattering little French lady to an hour of joy, why should it not do so?

So she was content to remain a little cynic and merely to watch the comedy with half-closed eyes.

The sea was calm and they were in Boulogne harbour at half-past one o'clock. No "Colonel Harvey" waited for them upon the quay-side; but Adeline seemed absolutely unperturbed by his absence and immediately ordered the porters to carry up the baggage to the Pavilion Hotel and there to await their coming. The month was that of June and already the bourgeoisie of Paris according to its custom was splashing and gambolling on the sands of Boulogne. Of real society upon such a shore, there was none—so Adeline could march bravely up to her hotel; and entering the hall of it with unshaken bravado, she asked boldly for her Colonel.

He was a big florid fellow, well-born, one of the Harveys of Castle Carlion, Somerset, and obviously of a type to appeal to women.

There was with him a certain Bellamy Renshaw, who appeared to have done most things, from diamond seeking on the Vaal river to an expedition up the great Congo, which cost many lives and helped to impoverish a credulous syndicate of financiers in Mayfair. This man had "explorer" written all over him and evidently had established a philosophy of life to his own content. For women he had no use whatever and did not hesitate to say so.

"Where there is a woman, there is trouble," was his adage. And from the very start he looked upon little Sophie as one of those potential enemies—until, indeed, he discovered that they shared a common creed and could stand together to survey the world with eyes of scorn.

"A pair of damned fools, these two," he told her confidingly, half an hour after they had met; "if Harvey wanted a strumpet, there are ten thousand in Paris whose husbands don't care a damn what they do. Now, he must poke his nose into Bornay's nest and they'll be cutting each other's throats presently. Well, I'll load his pistols for him if it comes to that and that's all I can do. You seem a sensible woman. How the devil did you get in this galley? Caught by that clever little Frenchwoman, I suppose? Well, I'm not surprised. She's caught Harvey all right and he's no chicken. The damned old fool—it will ruin him with his directors if there's any scandal. And ten thousand whores in Paris—isn't it wonderful?"

His candour was a little staggering and not wholly complimentary. Such a man obviously regarded women as so much cattle and Adeline de Bornay as no more than an ordinary sample of a marketable beast. Yet, Sophie found his very detachment from the conventional philosophy of social life not a little intriguing. He looked upon the universe and could say: "All these damned fools." The world for him lay away beyond the mountains. He could read the mind of a nigger—but not that of a politician.

For all that, the afternoon amused Sophie and she discovered that even philosophers were not immune from common failings.

Renshaw played at *petits chevaux* in the Établissement with the energy of a boy. He bathed in a cold sea and declared he was the better for it. At dinner he told them stories of African cannibals and dwelt upon the horrors of the human meat market, where living men and women were paraded with green grasses tied about their arms and legs and were eaten at sundown after other women had danced and the great fires had been lighted. And all the time he drank Château Yquem in prodigious draughts and ate like one of the savages of whose unpleasant habits he had spoken.

The lovers, meanwhile, sat side by side and Harvey's unemotional face would have betrayed to nobody the harmless fact that he was pinching Adeline's knee under the table. His contribution to the conversation was an occasional "What, what," and a loud laugh at thoughts he was too well-mannered to express.

Nevertheless, he spent the night with the Countess as Sophie was very well aware. Her bedroom was next to Adeline's and she lay awake a long time listening to the mumbling voices and the muted smatter of their talk. It all seemed rather horrible to the Englishwoman and she wondered if the disgust had anything to do with the fact that she was a mother. Must little Sophie know all about a life like this—or was there an alternative?

Perhaps the priests were right after all and the quest of the "eternal vision" alone could satisfy humanity.

Sophie lay long, wide-eyed and wondering. Whither was her destiny leading her—towards the unknown light or that darkness of night which so often enshrouded her?

CHAPTER XXIV

AT ASNIÈRES

SOPHIE soon had enough of the Hôtel Bornay and of its wholly worldly mistress.

She had not been three days in the house when it became apparent to her that Adeline had no further use for her and would be very glad to see her back. The end of the week found her in an odd little hotel on the banks of the river Seine at the village of Asnières—whither Bellamy Renshaw had summoned her upon a promise of novelty.

"Come and see the real thing," he said; "French artists who can paint and grisettes who think they are in love. Take off those absurd clothes of civilization and cease to believe in the ancient nobility. I've lived at Asnières for six months and I'm still amused. Of course, I can't really sculpt or paint; but I got the gold medal of the Salon for a bust of a Congo nigger this winter and so I'm in a way famous. I'll make you one of us and you must pretend to daub. Most of them do it pretty badly and you'll be famous. Anyway, come and see what people look like who don't wear clothes. They're interesting, I do assure you—and many of them quite virtuous. And if you're my friend, they'll be very nice to you."

So she went, driving all the way in a true Parisian fiacre and very glad to say "Good-bye" to Adeline. That kind of society was no good to her nor she to it. Perhaps America had spoiled her. These dukes and duchesses were really

most tiresome folks. And how laughable were their pretensions to be better than "the common herd."

So she went to Asnières upon the invitation of that strange savage, Bellamy Renshaw, whose gospel of life attuned itself so well with her own.

Certainly, the introduction to the village was not propitious, for Renshaw was not at the hotel when she arrived, and a very stout landlady seemed to have merely a vague idea that she was expected. A large room overlooking the river was, however, offered to her and here her two trunks were carried. Dinner was at six o'clock, they told her, and no doubt by that time Monsieur le grand Anglais would have arrived. Yes, they knew him very well. Everybody did in Asnières. So spiritual, so generous with his money, such a true "my lord."

Sophie was glad to hear it, but a little depressed by his absence. What would she do in this queer place if Renshaw failed her?

Happily, she was not called upon to answer the question. A note came to her hotel at half-past five telling her that the Englishman had been detained all day in Paris but would be at the Café Diane de Poiters at nine o'clock, where a little divertissement, to which she was invited, had been provided. Sophie ate her dinner alone; and at a little after nine o'clock she went over to the café; and mentioning Bellamy Renshaw's name, she was immediately admitted and shown to a place of honour.

It was an odd gathering truly.

The weirdest, wildest creatures filled a great bare room, where the marble-topped tables offered the hospitality of cheap wines, beers and coffee, and the walls were decorated with sooty portraits of Eve in divers attitudes.

A little stage had been erected at one end of the hall and nearby was a piano with pink candles in its sconces and much ragged music on the floor about it.

Here sat Bellamy Renshaw with a flaxen-haired cocotte on his lap. He played the piano to her, ingeniously nursing her with his arms while he did so, and she appeared to relish the performance.

Elsewhere, there was no kind of restraint at all. Women sprawled in the arms of lovers and displayed stockings of many hues. Some sang to Bellamy's music, some did little else but kiss their lovers. Bellamy himself beckoned Sophie to come over to him, but he continued, nevertheless, to play while he talked to her, and to try to tell her of the coming delights of what promised to be a hectic night.

"We're going to have charades—make you laugh—nobody's got any morals here, don't keep them—so you won't be surprised. Expect you soon got tired of the Hôtel Bornay—thought you would—well out of it—Bornay's challenged that old fool—thought he would—going to a public place like the Pavilion at Boulogne—he might as well have cuddled her at the opera—why, the very porter who carried up her baggage was an agent of the Sûreté—swords by the cascade and I've got to be there. It'll finish Harvey—he'll have to resign all his jobs—you're better here—this is the place for you—you'll see a lot of life," and so on and so on, while the "Blue Danube" continued to flow joyously and the girl to be cuddled to her satisfaction.

Presently came the charades, no entertainment for bishops.

They showed a sick man on a bed and pretty nurses and ridiculous doctors attended him. Draughts were administered to the patient as drenches to a horse. He gave signs of returning vitality and leaped up at length to embrace the prettiest of the nurses with a violence which delighted an amorous company.

This was called "The Cure" and was followed with a pretty tableau of fauns who had troubled no tailor, and of ladies who did not patronize the house of Worth. The

athletic side of "faunism" evidently appealed to the women and the conversation could not have been reported in the text-books. When, however, Jupiter appeared and was turned into a bull, Sophie began to think it time to go home and would have done so if Renshaw had not laughed her out of her scruples.

"All fun," he said; "it's their view of life—why be hypocrites—many a parson thinks what these lunatics say—go among the savages and you'll understand—all the rest is the sugar on the pill—we live without clothes here and think nothing of it—I'll take you round to my studio presently and we'll talk—these beggars will be at it until six in the morning and it gets unpleasant later on—just stop for this Helen of Troy nonsense and then we'll go and have supper—I must be off to Paris very early for this fighting business—the damned old fool—what will his beloved Queen Victoria say?"

Sophie neither knew nor cared. She was wondering all the time if Renshaw were honest or just a rogue. Had he insulted her by bringing her to this abode of uncivilized love or did he really think nothing of it?

More disquieting was the question: "Did he know anything about her past which led him to think that she might be insulted with impunity?"

She had not for many years regarded life from the point of view of her own story. Was it possible, even after this long interval of time, that people would remember and point the finger at her? If so, what of the future of her beloved Sophie? Must she take the child and hide her in some land afar? The thought of discovery terrified her and she knew not what to do.

They went on to Renshaw's apartment in the small hours and its elegance surprised her.

He had a valuable collection of Chinese porcelain, become fashionable and expensive once more after almost

a century of neglect. His pictures were almost revoltingly natural, but most of them were undoubted works of art. He had painted the panels of the ugly doors with sketches of pretty Parisiennes and Sappho was enshrined elsewhere as a goddess. Sophie, however, was surprised to find that none of this pornographic art shocked her. In that society, men and women appeared to go naturally without clothes —and, as Renshaw said afterwards, nakedness in savage tribes is the badge of true morality.

In this apartment she remained until daylight, listening to a man who smoked cheroot after cheroot and drank freely of a matured Château Yquem—of a vintage he declared to be the only really dry Yquem in the story of that wine. The theme of his sermon to Sophie was an invitation to come and live among them.

"Be free," he said, "you'll never be that in the Boulevard St. Germain. Somebody will turn up your history sooner or later—I know it, my dear, because Harvey is the friend of that prig of a father of yours and has heard all about you. It was because I knew that I was attracted by you. Most men will be—but the women, no! They'll say you've had a past and that will damn you. Cut it all out and live your own life. Bring your girl up in a society which won't ask who she was. Make her famous if she's got any talent . . . and if she hasn't, marry her in a world which lives only for the future. It's good advice, believe me. You're a pretty woman and the years are slipping by. Why, in God's name, make a nun of yourself? Do you want the sun to cease shining? Oh, my dear, there's a hell of a night waiting for us all and none know that better than the parsons who tell us the fairy stories."

"Then you think they are fairy stories, Mr. Renshaw?"

"Oh, call me Bellamy for the Lord's sake. There aren't any 'misters' at Asnières. Yes; I'm sure they are fairy stories, but I believe in God. Not the God of parsons,

mind you, but that great Spirit which decrees our destinies and is all about us, living or dead. There's my creed. The rest is a tale for the nursery."

She said that she supposed so, though she wondered what Father Arthur would think of her assent. How different was the world of his beliefs from this place of grisettes and cocottes—of painters, poets, and singers, whose morals were those of a guileless Eden, but whose virtues she came ultimately to accept as very real. A world of spirit and a life of utter abandon to impulse! How easy to accept a theology which came with music and dancing and was so often bedecked with flowers!

It was dawn when Renshaw left her at the little hotel and she promised him to think over all that he had said.

His own task, as he declared, was quite ridiculous and the outcome of it inevitably fatal to the reputation of an excellent fellow, who happened also to be a fool.

That good Queen Victoria forgave no public servant who had the misfortune to be found in the arms of a married lady, and the popular Colonel Harvey could be no exception.

He met the outraged Comte de Bornay near the Cascade in the Bois de Boulogne and for some two or three minutes they cut and thrust at each other with *épées de combat* while their seconds shouted "ugh" or "ah" or made other guttural noises which the excitements of the moment demanded.

It ended by Harvey being thrust through the sword-arm by a shrewd blow and the whole company returning to Paris in private carriages and discussing politics and the theatre as they went. Harvey had received no more than a scratch, but "honour" was satisfied and so the affair could not go on.

Alas, the unhappy man was immediately called upon to resign his lucrative appointments and to disappear from those Court circles he had adorned.

To be "found out" was the cardinal sin of those days.

But to be found in the arms of that little strumpet, Adeline de Bornay, was, as Renshaw shrewdly remarked, the very essence of concentrated idiocy for which no words were sufficiently scathing.

CHAPTER XXV

SOME NEW FRIENDS

SOPHIE took an apartment at Asnières and, after the summer holiday, which she and her little girl spent at Dieppe, whither so many of her new Bohemian friends resorted, she settled down to a life which was both joyous and novel.

"You must understand, dear Father Arthur," she wrote to that patient priest; "how difficult it is for me really to live in England. There will always be somebody ready to say, 'Ah, but I can tell you about her!'—and for Sophie's sake, I dare not risk that. By the greatest good luck, an Englishwoman, Mrs. Cathcart, has opened a little school for children in the town and, of course, I shall send Sophie there. At any rate, she will learn good French and that will be useful to her. They are all kindly people here, who starve by their art. My particular friend is a great traveller, Bellamy Renshaw, who lived for years in the wilds of Africa and is now recognized as a really great sculptor. They say he is most generous to all these poor struggling artists and certainly they need somebody's help. For all that, they never seem sad, and you may hear more jolly laughter in this little town in one night than you would hear in gloomy old England in twelve months. So, dear Father Arthur, I intend to make Asnières my home for some time to come and if ever you feel you would like a holiday in France, come over and see me and we will do our best to make you happy."

Sophie shuddered a little when she wrote the last lines

of this frank confession—for really she did not know what would happen if Father Arthur actually were to come. He, indeed, would never understand. The absolutely primitive life would be beyond his comprehension and what all these merry people merely called *l'amour* he would designate by another name. So Sophie hoped devoutly that he would never accept her invitation, nor did it appear likely that he would.

She liked Asnières—so pretty a place.

The river Seine was very beautiful here and the wooded promenades upon its banks delightful, especially when spring brought the acacias into bloom. There were little cafés, many by the water's edge and few of them without their fiddlers when the sun went down. People lived cheaply on beautifully cooked food, and excellent wine was but a few sous a bottle. As for clothes, they hardly counted. These artists went about half-naked in the studios and ten francs bought a muslin dress for *le dimanche*. Grisettes, who toiled and slaved all the week in the *ateliers* of the great Parisian costumiers, dressed themselves up on Sunday and went straight to the studios of their lovers, bearing gifts made often at so great a sacrifice. Food chiefly used to be taken, eggs to make omelets, patisseries, even meat upon occasion. Such people did not know the meaning of the word "sin." If you loved, you loved. How wicked to deny anything to him to whom you had given your heart.

Sophie had no real artistic gifts, but Bellamy Renshaw spurred her on to make an effort, and presently she found herself writing French villanelles and other trifling verses. Renshaw declared that some of them were excellent and sent them to the *Figaro*, which printed them above the signature "Philip" and actually paid her for them.

Then came one René Chasserel upon the scene and he insisted that some of these little songs would go well with music. René was at that time the proud *chef d'orchestre* of

the little Café Russe on the main Boulevard des Italiens. Six clever musicians were obedient to his baton; and every Saturday night he carried a different lady to Asnières that there might be neither jealousy nor complications, as he sapiently remarked.

"Be careful of René," Bellamy said to Sophie one night when they were dining at the Café together and she had just read rather a naughty love lyric to him; "he's too damned good-looking and all the women fall for him because he isn't more than five feet high. A most amusing little whippersnapper who's in every woman's arms almost as soon as she's shaken hands with him. You don't want to compromise yourself with a midget like that—Madame of the red hair and the damnably mischievous eyes."

Sophie answered somewhat hotly that she had no intention of compromising herself with anybody at Asnières —but she liked the bit about the mischievous eyes and she knew it was true. Nearly every other man she met desired to make love to her. Many were surprised when they were rebuffed. "Your belle Anglaise is as cold as marble," they complained to Renshaw. He smiled a little sardonically, for he thought that he knew the truth.

"Surely," said Sophie a little later in the argument, "surely you don't talk about people 'compromising' themselves at Asnières! I should have thought there was nothing to compromise. Didn't you once tell me that it was like the Garden of Eden? Then, they must have had newspapers with advertisements of fig leaves."

Renshaw laughed, for this was his own argument.

"Anyway," he objected; "you're different"—she liked to hear that—"people regard you as the grande dame and they don't expect to see you philandering with a man who's little better than a waiter. Why, the fellow earns about a hundred francs a week and is lucky to get that. He thinks he's an Offenbach or a Planquette."

"He's clever though," protested Sophie; "he's the cleverest musician I've heard at Asnières and the one most likely to make a success. Perhaps you will be shocked to hear that I am writing the libretto of an opera-bouffe with him. It's about Nell Gwynn and Charles the Second and the music is just fine. If that compromises me, let it—I believe in René and if people talk, well, my dear man, let them bark their loudest, it won't hurt me."

She could see that Renshaw was merely jealous and it amused her. Yet this strange recluse had never spoken a word of love to her since they had met; and for all her sex counted, she might have been a marble bust in an academy.

René, on the other hand, told her every day that he adored her. He would shake his black curls and stand on tip-toe to gaze into her "mischievous" eyes; and cry with rapture: "*Mais comme tu es adorable!*" In return, she would push him away, laughing as she did so. Yet that he attracted her physically she could not deny. "It's in my blood," she thought; "the Bible tells us about it—to the third and fourth generation—how can we help it, then? What can we do?"

Happily, this eternal problem of profound theology did not trouble her overmuch, for the excitements of her association with the little musician were too engrossing and their "opera-bouffe" occupied every hour that could be given to it.

René knew the Paris theatre too intimately to suppose that any "direction" would produce an operetta by an unknown composer unless there were influence behind it. And that influence must in this case be money.

"If I had twenty-five thousand francs to spare," he declared; "I should soon be famous and you would be famous with me. But where shall one find such money? *Hélas!* it does not drop from heaven and all that I possess in the world would not satisfy even the *metteur en scène* to say nothing of Monsieur *le Directeur* and the others. No, no,

we shall hope for fortune . . . and my dear camarade, I shall love you very much while we wait, and you I hope will love me."

Sophie let him kiss her when he had said this, and then, leading him by the ear to the piano, she made him play the music to her great song, "Buy my Sweet Oranges," which Mistress Nell Gwynn should sing at the door of Drury Lane Theatre. No doubt about it, the music had a fine lilt and should catch the ear both of London and of Paris. Even the hostile Renshaw admitted that.

"The little devil can write tunes with anybody," he said; "if he weren't trying to make a fool of you, I'd put up the money myself. But you know the truth—you want him and you mean to have him."

"A lie, a lie," she rejoined hotly; "he is no more to me than any of your ragged crew. Why do you say such things? How shall I remain your friend if you do?"

"Come, come, I am always your friend. Don't make a fool of yourself—that's all I am asking of you."

"Oh, my dear man, am I not old enough and have I not seen enough of the world to take care of myself? A little doll like that! A dancing marionette. You talk like an idiot, Bellamy. Really, I don't know why I listen to you."

"You listen to me because you know I am your friend. For that matter, I'll put up the money myself if it will please you. I've plenty, you know. Don't know what to do with it—unless I give it away to these ragamuffins. That's why I came here, my dear. No charity organization for me. Why, there isn't one case of need in twenty here, against which, if you went to a charitable society, they wouldn't plead sin as an objection. As much as to say: 'We give nothing where human nature steps in.' I give and ask no questions. Two hearts that beat as one can divide the money anyway."

Sophie laughed.

"And yet you judge me; don't worry, Bellamy, I'll find the money. Even if I lose it, a thousand pounds won't make much difference to me. I'll give René his chance. Really, my dear, I shall laugh for a week if we have a success. Little me, a dramatic authoress! What would my saintly father say if he heard of it?"

He never heard of it, but that is another story.

The operetta was actually produced in the first week of September at the Bouffes Parisien and was such an instantaneous success that all the other authors and composers in Paris gasped.

A little fiddler from a third-rate café! A librettist of whom nobody had ever heard, who called himself "Philip" and could not be discovered. And a triumph which was undisputed!

The tunes, people said, would be sung all over Paris in three days. And the work had been sold to London actually as it was being played.

One of the richest of the English "proprietors" happened to be in the theatre and he had perceived instantly the value of the work. He promised to call upon the famous Authors' Society of Paris in the morning and complete the deal. That meant good money for René and Sophie at the very beginning. Obviously, the thousand pounds were well invested and she was about to enrich herself above any of her hopes.

The thought excited her, but was less than the actual facts of the success.

Every song went with a swing. The lyric, "Not really Naughty you Know," sung by King Charles and Nellie set the house roaring with laughter. Old Lady Castlemayne, a fine caricature of a hag, got three encores for her mock "ballad"—"Put me in my Little Bed." Rochester was the most dashing of rakes and Pepys was shown cuddling every

woman he met. The very thing for the *Bouffes* said the critics. Why on earth had such a tuneful writer remained in obscurity so long!

Sophie witnessed the show from a box which Renshaw had taken and while his congratulations were honest, she perceived that he was not too well pleased.

"You've got better brains than to be doing stuff like this," he commented; "write a good comedy for the Français and I'll guarantee to have it produced. This kind of thing brings money but very little credit. If it goes, everybody pats the composer on the back. If it's a failure, people say: 'What a poor libretto!' Besides, my dear, it's drivel and you know it's drivel. Write a comedy and make a name for yourself. I shall be proud of you then. To-night, frankly, I am a little ashamed."

She was annoyed by this and would not, in her mood of exaltation, admit it to be true.

What of Scribe and Halevy and the others, she might have asked him! Opera-bouffe could be as sure an expression of art as any the theatre knew. Where would the Strausses have been without their librettists?

She held her tongue, however, and when he would not accompany René and herself afterwards to a little private supper at the Café Russe, she merely decided that it was just bad temper and that they were better without him. For all that, she was still aware that she had not truer friend in Paris.

The supper was an amusing affair and all the "principals" were there. News of René Chasserel's success had preceded them and the *habitués* of the Café stood up and cheered when René entered. As for his little band, it was beside itself and started to play some of the music of the opera, already rehearsed, with hilarious energy. Everybody appeared to kiss everybody else and the champagne to flow like water.

This atmosphere was infectious and Sophie found herself enjoying every minute of the jolly night.

How different from the silent, mysterious days at the farm when she had been the wife of Philip Hart-Brown and he had wished to keep her a secret from the world.

Or, again, what an absolute change from all the humbug, the cant and the chicanery of that man, George Washington Addy, whose mistress she had been while she believed herself his wife. Sophie wondered if she could ever sit in a London drawing-room again and ask the parson of the parish about his knitting. These people around her drank at the fountain of life. The wine was golden in the glass and it intoxicated them. They cared not that to-morrow the same wine would be still and flat and unprofitable. For them, the Spaniard's *mañana* did not exist.

Of course René Chasserel was in wonderful spirits and he paid open homage to Sophie, placing her upon his right hand and seeing that her glass was never empty. It was five o'clock in the morning when they caught the first train to Asnières and even upon their arrival he would not hear of bed. "Let us walk by the river," he said . . . and she dreamily consented. A grassy bank invited them to rest and René to make the most unabashed love to her. Again and again he kissed her and she did not repulse him now. Had not Renshaw taught her that one's instinct about such things was always right? She liked René and responded to his embraces. Why not, she argued. To whom was she responsible?

So, much happened of which her grave English friend would not have approved—yet for all her jungle philosophy, Sophie came to herself when at last she entered her apartment and saw that little Sophie was lying half out of bed, uncovered and with her mouth wide open. The child seemed to rebuke her mother and all the glitter and the froth of a giddy night.

"I shouldn't be doing such things," said Sophie to her-

self; "no, no, Bellamy Renshaw is right. I should be thinking of my child," and quite instinctively and without a suspicion of seeming hypocrisy of her words, she uttered aloud a prayer to the Blessed Virgin to protect and cherish this little one.

"She has nobody but me," she reflected. "God help her if I am taken."

The mood passed swiftly and gave place to another.

What of Sophie's future when she must go out into life and be the mistress of her own fortunes!

Was she to be reared to social respectability or to be loosed into this world of dreams and delusions?

If only she should be a really great artist—ah, then, the road would be easy. Sophie thought of her as a singer, as a musician, as a sculptor—she might become famous and all Paris do her honour.

On the other hand, time might make of her nothing but a stupid little girl, mouthing shibboleths and smirking at the men. Sophie feared that above all things. The "miss" of the select schools seemed to her little better than the mentally afflicted. No, no; her Sophie must become great and famous.

She determined already to devote the whole of her fortune to make her so.

CHAPTER XXVI

WE HEAR OF JOHN BLAKE AGAIN

JOHN BLAKE always said that one of the most amazing coincidences he ever heard of was that of his marriage and of the marriage of his cousin, Sophie.

Neither, in law, had been marriages at all, for in one case the husband had a wife living and in the other the wife was still the possessor of a husband. These strange affairs gave the unlucky man a topic for conversation wherever he went. He wrote a newspaper article about it, though very wisely he suppressed all names.

When John got rid of Emily, he found himself in possession of some couple of thousand pounds and of a few theatrical properties. The money really belonged to the lady who ought to have been his wife but was not and she often described him afterwards as a mean thief. John did not mind that and he reflected that she was well provided for—though her husband had not a shilling.

"Sir Patrick will look after you," he wrote to her, barbarian that he was; and when she replied that he was the greatest cad she had ever heard of, he merely laughed.

"Every man for himself and every woman for a man," was an epigram of which he was very proud when first he made it, and repeated often to the children who ultimately came to him.

Of course, he wrote to his aunt, the Countess, greatly

to her annoyance, and told her all about this odd affair, while hinting plainly that he would like the Earl to set him up in another business—an invitation that proud, if not haughty, noble treated with derision.

"There's a fellow we shall have on our backs to the end of our lives," he said to the patient Helen; "they tell me in Birmingham that another six months of him would have bankrupted the foundry and it's been making five or six thousand a year since he went. A Punch and Judy show is the place for a wastrel like that. I won't give him a shilling, so help me God."

Helen, of course, had to put in a soft word. She always did.

"But, Leonard, he's got rid of that awful woman for ever. That's something in his favour, surely."

The Earl did not see it.

"Why do you call her an awful woman? Because she married him and tried to help him to get a living? I don't call her awful at all. I saw her at the theatre and she appeared to be just as far above him in culture and refinement as a racehorse is above a mule. A damned pretty woman too, though I admit she was not a great actress. And now I see by the papers that the husband's dead after all. Died just three weeks after reaching England. She had a narrow escape, it appears. Don't you see that she might still be this lout's wife, and then, God help her."

Helen saw that it was no good and she went off to write the bad news to John, while the Earl stroiled out into his park to look at his hunters, who were at grass.

"Get a place for yourself in some good business," was her advice to her nephew, "and then I am sure your uncle will help you. You ought to have inherited brains from your grandfather; and if we see you employing them and becoming really industrious, then we shall be able to

do something for you. But no more women, John. You haven't the money to marry any girl in your own station and anything else will mean the end of all your hopes as far as we are concerned."

John did not like the epistle and he had no intention whatever of getting a job.

"To be bossed about by some fat and greasy merchant," as he put it, was the last thing to which he would submit. He had two thousand pounds and the call of the wild afflicted him. So he went off to the country, and after wandering about for a month, he came to a little inn of a remote village in Norfolk and there he fell into a regular trap and drowned all hope of the Countess and her lord in one vulgar orgy wherein drink and a wily but dubious Irishman played the leading part.

The inn lay a few miles from the village of St. Olaves, upon the shore of a considerable inland Broad, the owner of which was a great landlord with a property near Yarmouth.

Jeremy Hooker was the Boniface thereof, and while he pretended that he came from County Down in Ireland and was a staunch Catholic, a true Irishman might have ventured the opinion that he had really been born in Chicago and that all his farcical Irish idioms were a mere pretence to conceal his true identity. "Bedads" and "begorrahs" flowed from his lips like water or, as he would have preferred, whisky from a fountain. He slapped everybody on the back and a stranger could not be five minutes in his presence and fail to be addressed as "my bhoy."

"'Tis from Ireland I am and a great country, faith. Would I hate the English—sure I would not, for my mother was born in Belfast city and God rest her soul for as true a Protestant as ever God created. Ay, and my poor wife too —that came from the very town of Yarmouth and is now in

purgatory—may the saints deliver her. I tell you, sir, I have a heart for all nations and God save Ireland first of all. Ye'll be having a glass of the good whisky with me just for luck and ould Ireland's prosperity. My own country, sir, my dear native land."

John Blake, in his post-nuptial wanderings about England, came upon this fellow one day when he went over to the Broad to see the famous "duck" decoy about which so many sportsmen had told him. He had driven over from Yarmouth and chanced to call at the "Erin Arms" for a little light refreshment . . . when lo and behold, Master Jeremy Hooker espied him and at once began to interrogate him as though he had the right to question every stranger who came to his door.

"Ye'll be from London—ay, 'tis a fine city though I don't know a great deal of it. 'Tis the sport that brings you here, belike. Sure, sir, there's no finer sporting county in England. Why! they sell fifteen hundred duck every year from the decoy yonder and could double the number if they had the brains to put more capital in it. Yes, sir, and the fishing—why, I've taken a twenty-four pound pike out of that loch"—he liked the word "loch," which he really could pronounce as Irishmen do—"and he was a baby, they tell me, to some that are swimming about there. Ye should make a stay in the place if ye've any mind to sport. We've a fine bedroom at the back and it'll give you as pretty a view over the water as any you'll see in Scotland."

John rather liked the idea. He was at a loose end and really did not know what to do with himself and the eighteen hundred pounds which remained of his money. Not a great sportsman, nevertheless his dead father had made of him a passable shot and he could sit as patiently at the end of a fishing line as any other fool. Moreover, there was the daughter Gracie, who appeared presently to clinch the argument.

"My only child, sir," explained Jeremy Hooker, introducing this prodigy of feminine excellence; "'tis no better, no more virtuous lady you'll find in all Norfolk. Bedad, and she ought to be, for I had the rearing of her myself. Speaks French like a native, sir, and can play a jig on the piano with any man. She'll take care of you if you come to bide with us awhile. You should taste her 'hot-pot.' There's not a cook in all England can make as good."

He shook his great red head with conviction and his bleary eyes flashed defiance to any who would doubt his word.

"Gracie" herself was certainly a very substantial "little girl" and appeared to weigh a good ten stone. She, also, had chestnut-coloured hair and her breasts did not lack development. But her eyes were blue and kindly; and of her modesty there could be no doubt.

"Would you like to cook for me?" asked John gallantly. Gracie cast down her eyes and replied that she would do her best.

"But you mustn't believe all that my father says," she protested; "of course, he is prejudiced."

"Not prejudiced at all, but a teller of the truth, my child. Would you call me a liar, me that brought you into this world of sin? Ye can cook better than any of them and I'll lay me shillelah on the head of any man that denies it. Why, sir, if the day is nothing to you, bide with us and let her serve you a Chateaubriand, the same that I ate in Philadelphia with the famous General Grant—a great and dear friend of mine, sir, God rest his soul. Will ye be in a hurry now? Have ye anything to take ye back to Yarmouth—a stinking hole, sir, for those who do not like the smell of herrings. Ye'll be happier with us."

John thought that he would; and next day he carried all his worldly possessions to the Erin Arms and there in-

stalled himself in the "fine bedroom" at the back and began to enjoy the artistry of his paragon of a cook.

Gracie certainly did look after him very well and soon discovered his whims and habits and made them her special care. It was, "Mr. Blake, would you be taking this?" or "Mr. Blake, and I'm sure a glass of the whisky would be doing you no harm." His clothes were brushed and mended diligently. He had not eaten better food for years —and all for the sum of five guineas a week—"no charge at all," as Jeremy Hooker protested, but "just a little recognition as between gentlemen."

As to the sport, well, that was another story.

It dawned upon John one day that this boisterous Irishman was really a bit of a poacher and that "my lord's" keepers regarded him with just suspicion.

"'Tis permission I have to shoot a pigeon or two," he explained to John ". . . and if we can manage to borrow another gun for ye from Yarmouth town, 'tis some pretty sport we may have."

John did not care much about shooting pigeons, but having partaken of several whiskies during the drive in the pony-cart to Yarmouth, he let himself go and purchased a fine double-barrelled gun for twenty pounds—a bargain as Jeremy said and to be obtained only because the gunmaker was a friend of his.

With this weapon they went out next day—it being the tenth day of a warm month of September and having shot half a dozen pigeons in the tree-tops about the "loch," they happened to stroll back over a field of roots and there to put up a covey of well-fattened partridges.

Of these, Jeremy Hooker shot a brace, as he declared "by the merest accident in the world, dear bhoy. Bedad, and I thought they were plover."

That night, one of the keepers called at the inn and drank a great deal of Irish whisky. When he left it was

after eleven o'clock, and at the gate he cried back to Jeremy: "Do you be more careful next time Mr. Hooker, and larn yourself to pick out a plover from a partridge"—which was merely to say that he was tongue-tied and not a little drunk. And, in his turn, Jeremy said to John: "Whisky, my bhoy, never have I known it to fail anybody. Bedad, it's a miracle worker."

John grew to like this life, lazy and dirty and not a little gluttonous as it was. The ascetic side was represented by a forced celibacy which accorded ill with his sensual nature, and he had not been in Norfolk a month before he found himself casting sheep's eyes at Gracie and receiving from her but modest blushes in reply. To seduce he was afraid, for this man Hooker was quite capable of murdering him if he did—and marriage was really a staggering idea even to his mentality.

Hooker, no doubt, had the wit to perceive the situation and to make the most of it.

Often he spoke of marriage and uttered the most terrible threats against the seducer.

"If any man seduced me daughter, by the holy saints above me, I'd tear his heart out and I'd ate it——" and, upon this, he would strike a terrifying attitude and really give the impression that he would be as good as his words.

John went in terror of him—but there was no other woman in the house and the sheep's eyes were still at Gracie's disposal. Soon she blushed less frequently and sighed more. One day, when she handed John a letter from his lawyer, their hands touched and he squeezed hers for quite a long time. She merely cried: "Oh, Mr. Blake," but did not withdraw her paw. Phyllis and Corydon business this, with the good Irish whisky always in the background.

Jeremy knew all about it, but he merely held his tongue. He was trying to sell John a share in a worthless herring-

boat at that moment, and love and fish hardly went together. So he left it for the time being and devoted his eloquence to persuading John to buy something which nobody else in Yarmouth would touch.

"She's the broth of a boat, me bhoy," he explained, "and you couldn't spend your money better than by taking a share in her. Catchpole says you might easily make five hundred pounds the year and that's no shabby thing, faith. I'll take you over to see her one day and you shall judge for yourself. Bedad, we'll sail down to Braydon and come to the harbour that way. 'Tis a boat I can borrow from Mr. Farman and we'll have plenty of the drink aboard—ay, and Gracie shall make us a pasty and we'll sup coming home. A thousand pounds to make ye sure for life. Begorrah 'tis a bargain for the wise man and I've never heard a better all the years I've been in Norfolk."

John was hard put to it to answer. He knew nothing about boats and Jeremy Hooker knew even less. If he suspected that his loquacious friend was about to draw a handsome commission on the transaction, he was too frightened of him to say so. The plain fact was that he had taken very kindly to the drink and was now more frequently fuddled than sober. He did not actually get drunk—merely stupid and assenting. And his desire to cuddle the fat Gracie waxed stronger day by day. Five months now since he had kissed any kind of woman. Purgatory that, for a fellow like John. He must alter it all sooner or later —and better sooner.

So the day came when they set out upon the picnic and a beautiful day of late September it was. Farman had lent them a handy little ketch and his boy Walter to help them to navigate it. Gracie brought a prodigious quantity of food as she promised and Jeremy saw to it that glass bottles tinkled in wicker hampers and that all of them were full.

Of course John knew nothing about fishing-boats and if they had shown him a Thames wherry of the days of King George the Third, possibly he would have bought it.

The actual vessel to which they conducted him lay in the river at Yarmouth, so they moored the ketch by the town bridge and walked across the market-place to see her. Spick and span she was with the best paint that Yarmouth could sell and all her brass shining like a Roman's mirror. John admired her very much and the man Catchpole did not neglect to feed his vanity.

"Do you look at her this way or do you look that, Mr. Blake, there's narthen in this river to beat her. Worth a good couple of thousand pounds of any man's money she be, and cheap at that. There's a little fortune to lie there for any man that cares to stand in with me. Ay, she be wholly a masterpiece, as Mr. Hooker will be telling ye."

Naturally, Hooker told him the same and with emphasis which appeared to be Hibernian but rather suggested Drury Lane and the low comedians there.

"Sure, every word that he says goes to me heart," exclaimed that loquacious worthy; "had I the shekels, 'tis this minute I would buy her. Faith, she's a fairy of a ship and doesn't every lad in Yarmouth know that same? Ye'll be mad to pass by such a bargain, sir. Why, 'tis a fortune lies at anchor there and one must be as blind as a one-eyed guinea-pig not to see it."

Neither of these worthies was at the pains to tell John that a strong man with a good stick might poke a hole in the bottom of this belauded vessel, so rotten was the state of the planking, nor did they mention the somewhat important fact that Lloyds would have nothing to do with her. It was all talk of money—and chiefly of John's money, of which comparatively so little remained to him.

"How soon must I pay for it?" he asked meekly.

They told him that any time was their time. Were they not dealing with gentlemen?

"Your bond is all my friend Catchpole will be asking," declared Hooker loftily; "a friend of mine, Mr. Blake, is a friend of his. Ye have only to slip up to the 'Star Inn' yonder and the matter can be settled in five minutes. And if it's my advice you're taking, ye'll not delay a minute longer."

John did not delay. The papers had already been prepared by the astute Catchpole and he signed them like a lamb. Afterwards, they drank rum to the immortal memory of the great Lord Nelson, as every seaman in East Anglia ever does, and then only Jeremy Hooker and the new proprietor of a herring-boat, John Blake, not a little elated by the importance of the position now thrust upon him, returned to the forlorn Gracie and the humble ketch.

"We'll drink to your success, my bhoy, and we'll drink deep, faith," exclaimed the delighted captain and even his fat and chubby daughter was not averse from that, though the poor girl seemed far less pleased about the whole business than her rascally father.

She loved John—this poor little house slave, this Gracie.

Whether her love would have come to anything but for an unmerciful intervention of Providence, no man afterwards was ever able to say, John least of all.

The ketch stranded on a sandbank of the Braydon water as the party was returning home at a late hour that night and there was nothing for it but to wait for the tide, which meant dawn before they were afloat again, and damp and misty hours intervening.

Jeremy Hooker took it all as the best of happenings and thanked God and St. Patrick for the abundance of good liquor with which he had prudently stocked the ship. Gracie

cut sandwiches until she was tired and then declared she was cold. They saw no possibility of help afloat on all that wide and desolate water; and as the night deepened, so did the vapours which searched their very bones. It was almost ironical to hear afar the church bells which seemed to tell of joy. Gracie said so when John put his arm about her just to keep her warm.

"Oh, John, wouldn't you give something to be in a nice warm bed?"

"Darling," he whispered, for the liquor had by now taken a strong hold of him; "I'd give all I had if you were there with me."

Gracie trembled with shame, but she did not dare to rebuke him.

Jeremy Hooker fell fast asleep a little later on and lay in a drunken stupor from which the last trump would hardly have awakened him. Closer and closer drew John and Gracie, and the daylight found the wench fast asleep in John's embrace and both his arms about her. Thus, Jeremy Hooker discovered them when the gulls awakened him to a feverish desire for soda-water, and by such a posture his joy was born.

"Congratulations, my bhoy, my dear son," he roared when John, alarmed, sat up and looked about him, "never did I think to have the nephew of an earl for my own son-in-law—yet, laddie, though ye were the Queen's boy, I'd say she was too good for ye. Bedad, we'll have the wedding at Fritton church and the hell of a breakfast afterwards. Ay, John, John, and ye never said a word of it to your poor old feyther—not a word by the holy Jesus——"

John had to offer explanations, Gracie's face was the colour of boiled ham—but to neither would the excited Jeremy listen.

Accident had delivered this young man into his hands and no alligator had a surer grip. How he would blackmail

that Earl of Wichfield of whom John had been foolish enough to speak in moments of his pride; what "iligant" letters he would write to the Countess. "Your ladyship's most devoted;" "your ladyship's most grateful."

Not a man, truly, to spare a youth caught almost in *flagrante delicto* with his beloved daughter. Yet a more innocent association had never been. John could not have treated Gracie with more respect if she had been his own sister.

From the start, that poor lout saw that it was hopeless.

He was not a coward in a common way; but of this wild, if spurious, Irishman he was admittedly afraid.

The man would, he believed, brain him with his shillelah on next to no provocation and then defend himself by declaring that he had done it to protect his daughter's honour. He was a violent drunken desperado whom anybody might have feared—and even in flight, there might be no escape from him.

To this motive for assent another was to be added and that should have interested the psychologists. John was frankly attracted by a simple, modest woman, who obviously was in love with him and had no social past. The life in Norfolk was lazy and agreeable. They ate good food, drank good liquor and like the squirrels, they loved to lie in the sun. Let a wife be added to such joys—John knew that Gracie would be his very slave—and what more could an indolent man ask of his destiny?

As to the girl, the mere thought of lying for ever and ever in John's arms caused her to tremble at the promise of delights.

He was the only man into whose company she had been thrown since she was a mere child; and she had responded instantly by falling in love with him. What an insurance of her future that would be! Ingenuous as she was, she had the idea that men who drank as hard as her father did

do not make old bones; and she had long been afraid that she might be thrown on the world a pauper and have to scrub steps for a living. This John—her John—stood in her eyes for a veritable Sir Galahad, who would fight for her and work for her and at the worst keep the inn roof over her head.

"Every shilling that I have in this accursed wor-r-ld will I leave to me dearest darlint," Jeremy would protest when the drink was in him.

Gracie knew that the promise might concern a sum of three pounds, four shillings and sixpence and she was not deeply moved.

But John—her John—ay, there was the hope.

So, of course, her consent was there from the beginning. Jeremy Hooker hardly paid her the compliment of asking her opinion about it, but he went roaring and ramping through the village, telling everybody—even the marshmen and the poachers—that "me dearest choild is marrying the nephew of an earl and no better could he find if he netted the whole counthry. There's the blood of Irish kings in our veins, I'd have ye to know, and we bow the knee to no man that ever put on the breeches. 'Tis at Fritton church it will be, and by special licence from my friend, the archbishop. Faith, there'll be some wigs on the green if money can lay them there."

Jeremy feared the "banns," he knew not why, for John certainly was of an age when he should be able to decide the matter for himself, and as for Gracie, her dear "feyther" would answer for her. Nevertheless, the cunning fellow believed that "time" might be of the essence of the conspiracy and that any day might find John Blake rebelling against the situation and telling him that both he and his daughter might be damned.

"A great big lout," Jeremy argued, "and it would not be my fancy to get a punch on the nose from such." So he

hurried affairs, selling the last of some old silver that he had to buy a trousseau for Gracie and borrowing the money from his destined son-in-law to get a new coat to his own back.

John, meanwhile, wrote an account of the affair to his beloved aunt and great was the consternation at Wichfield Castle when the letter was received.

"You will be pleased, dear Aunt," he wrote, "to know that I am marrying Grace Hooker, the daughter of a very old Irish family and a descendant, I believe, of that Hooker who wrote about Ecclesiastical Policy or something of that kind. They have come down in the world so far as money is concerned, and the father, Mr. Jeremy Hooker, now keeps the hotel in this district; but he is greatly respected and even the vicar of the parish understands that he is well born and a gentleman. I hope, therefore, dear Aunt, that you and my uncle will not be displeased and will send Grace, my wife that is to be, some little present which will show her that you are willing to receive her into the family. I am to be married next Thursday, so I cannot come to Wichfield to see you; but I think it my duty to tell you everything at once in case any slander about the Hookers reaches you from any quarter, as I fear it might do, people being so very jealous of these old families and always ready to disparage them."

The Earl read the letter when the Countess had finished with it and he laughed more heartily at it than he had done at anything for a long time.

"Good God," he exclaimed; "a publican's daughter. Don't talk to me about hotels. I know the place and there isn't a decent hotel within five miles of the hole. A publican's daughter, I tell you—that's your new niece. Draw you a 'mild and bitter' while you wait."

"But, my dear, he speaks of their birth——"

"Birth, I wish he'd speak of their death. They're all sons of kings in Ireland, especially when they're shooting down the landlords. I tell you she's probably a barmaid and she made him drunk enough to propose to her. They'll have fifteen children and you'll have to keep 'em. Well, thank God, that finishes him so far as this house is concerned. He won't come in here again though her father's a bishop. I'm ringing for Lorrimore now to tell him so——"

The stately butler received the command without the tremor of an eyelid and went off to communicate the strange tidings to the servants' hall.

"Our precious nephew ain't a coming here no more," he said to the fat housekeeper—and there was pleasure in his tone. "Been and married a girl out of a pub, so far as I could hear 'em through that nasty keyhole—my lord's done with him, and quite right too. A common pusson as anybody could see, Mrs. Smythe. Only gave me five shillings once in his life and made as much fuss about it as though it wus a five-pun note."

There was another letter from Norfolk, as was to be expected, and that came from Jeremy Hooker, who composed it with the aid of Liddell's grammar, a dictionary, and half a bottle of whisky. It was penned by a sycophant and a vulgarian and every line of it betrayed the man.

"Your ladyship," it ran, "will permit me the honour, as one about to enter your exalted family, to lay a tribute of my profound respect at your feet. Your nephew has asked me for the hand of my dear child and nothing but the fact of his noble birth, his integrity, his true religious spirit has permitted me to entrust him with one who has been the light of my eyes, my dearest life, my whole treasure and most beloved possession. Ladyship, we are not rich but I will take leave to say that our family history

is no less glorious than your own and whereas your forbears were the intimates of kings in your own country, so in mine have we stood near the throne and known how to defend it. Therefore we shall meet on the common ground of a royal ancestry against which no man shall dare to say a word. Ladyship, the wedding is on Thursday next at the church of the Blessed St. Mary, to which you may come from the station of St. Olaves in a quarter of an hour. My carriage shall be there to meet you if you and my lord will do us the immaculate honour to attend, and I, in person, will be there to pay my respects. So, with my humble duty to you both, I beg to subscribe myself,

"Your obedient, most faithful, humble servitor,

"JEREMY HOOKER."

The stately Helen dared not show this letter to the Earl, for she knew how greatly it would anger him.

John, after all, was her sister's child and she had loved Lucy dearly. The task, therefore, of informing her nephew that she wished him well but could see him no more was beyond the capacity of her kindness—and quite unknown to Wichfield, she posted a little brooch of emeralds and diamonds to the blushing bride and with it a brief line of congratulation.

Never did a present cause a greater stir in a village than the gift of this bauble in the district of St. Olaves. Jeremy Hooker spent hours showing it to his neighbours—"from my cousin, the Countess—they'll be at the wedding surely—faith, they're rightly proud to have me daughter among 'em. I stay at the Castle, but not until the autumn—ay, 'tis a glad day in my life and honourable to both parties"—and so on, and so on, and whisky to every man who saw it at the inn and a fine tale for the vicar when he passed by.

Jeremy verily believed that he would be kissing the Countess presently. Her curt letter declining the invitation in icy terms by no means discouraged him. "She'll be at Windsor with the Queen," he said, "'tis her duty to go there and naturally her family can't stand between."

Thus the wedding was celebrated without any of John's distinguished relatives to support him. His sister Lucy wrote frankly to tell him that he was "a beast" to do such a thing and his brother-in-law, Freddy Wharton, unhesitatingly described him as a "drunken barnstormer," who ought to be sent out of the country. He, indeed, joined with the Earl in the employment of a private detective to discover who this man Jeremy Hooker really was, and ascertained eventually that he had been born in Philadelphia, the son of an exiled Irish "Fenian" and of a woman who had swung on trapezes in a circus. This, however, came some months afterwards, and the distressing tidings did not affect the warmth of those embraces which John bestowed upon his substantial if blushing bride. She was dreadfully shy and quite obviously innocent of Garden of Eden philosophy. Her father at least deserved the credit of having sheltered her from all evil.

So the church bells rang out and Jeremy Hooker wore an enormous flower in the button-hole of his frowsy black-brown coat, while John had a silk hat down from London, and the whisky certainly did run like water, and the half a dozen bottles of champagne were of the finest vintage, for Jeremy had reserved them for the sportsmen who came down to shoot in the autumn, and they were fellows who really did know what good wine was. It was a great wedding, truly, and every poacher in the district obligingly got drunk.

John made no attempt to take his bride away for any kind of honeymoon—for, as Jeremy said: "That's not what our forefathers did, my bhoy, when they wedded and bedded

them." Indeed, he was cuddling Gracie while, down below, his father-in-law was singing in a voice of thunder that ancient and touching ballad known as "Lots of fun at Finnagan's Wake." Poor John. How hopelessly he had done for himself in those brief and tragic hours!

It is true that the reckoning did not come for some months—not indeed, until Gracie was well on her way to have her first baby and John's over-tried bank balance began to show signs of wear and tear.

The unfortunate fishing-boat, the *Mary Anne*, met with nothing but disaster from the start and one rough night of October, she was caught in a bad north-easter and smashed to pieces on the Long Sands not five miles from Yarmouth town. John lost every shilling he had put into that venture and was threatened with an action to boot. He had then but three hundred pounds left in all the world and Jeremy Hooker made no bones about the fact that he, himself, was on the verge of bankruptcy.

"Bad cess to it," he would cry; "'tis all this trouble in my native land and none of me property bringing in a shilling. We'll have to do something, my bhoy, for Gracie's sake, and the sooner you pack up and visit those rich friends of yours, the better for us all. You must see the Earl and demand a place from him. He's friends enough in the government and should do handsomely by ye. Faith, I'd send Gracie as well but for her condition. They'd never be saying 'no' to such a lady; 'tis not the heart they would have to do it."

John was not so sure about it, but he was still very much afraid of Jeremy and, perhaps, not sorry to escape for a little while from that atmosphere of frowsiness and drink in which he had lived for so many months. He was in London two days later and somewhat relieved to discover that neither the Earl nor the Countess was at the great house in Arlington Street, but that both were then at Brighton, by reason, as

a young footman told him, of "his lordship's *ammonia*, which is shocking bad, I understand, sir." John determined to go there, but first to see some of the "sights" of that city wherein he had lived such gay days, to say nothing of the nights.

The place seemed a little changed, he thought, even though he had been absent for so brief a period.

They had rebuilt the Alhambra and now there was another music-hall in Leicester Square. The Gattis, who used to run a "billiard saloon" under the arches of Charing Cross, were becoming famous people and had a fine restaurant of their own; while a new theatre had been erected in Panton Street and an actor named Fred Leslie had there established a prodigious reputation by playing as "Rip van Winkle" in an operetta by the French composer, Planquette.

Henry Irving had now gone right to the head of his profession and Ellen Terry was said by everybody to be the greatest actress. There was good fun at the Gaiety with Nellie Farren and Kate Vaughan; while two men, a Mr. Arthur Sullivan and a Mr. Gilbert had written a light opera called "Pinafore" which seemed to be altogether different from anything the theatre had known before.

John went and saw that and next day he played billiards in Gattis' saloon and afterwards watched the ballet dancing at the Alhambra. Several ladies offered him their love at the market rate, but "No," said John firmly. He had had enough philandering to last him for the rest of his life. And to give him his due, he meant to be faithful to Gracie.

When he went down to Brighton a few days later, he arrived there at the height of the season and, indeed, Brighton did enjoy a season in those years.

Few went then to the Riviera, and nearly everybody prepared for the winter hunting and shooting by a few weeks at that happy town which the "First Gentleman in Europe" had glorified.

John saw a great line of carriages, magnificently horsed, rolling from the village of Hove right up to Kemp Town and he had to admit that many of the ladies within them were beauties. Luck even showed him his "dear aunt," in a magnificent barouche drawn by a splendid pair of roans; and having ascertained that she had taken a house in Brunswick Square, he ran round there like a sprinter at an athletic meeting and hung about the precincts until she should return.

To such depths of humiliation had the drink and the women brought him.

Poor Helen was greatly shocked when she saw this shabby figure upon the pavement before her house and, for the moment, she hardly knew him.

John had grown fat and coarse. His face was inflamed by the drink and he appeared to be much in need of a bath. Yet his manner was bold, there being only a woman to be dealt with, and he stepped right in front of his aristocratic relative and showed his determination to have speech with her.

"Aunt Helen—don't you know me?"

She knew him too well—and afraid of observation, of the servants and their talk, she drew him swiftly into the hall and so into a little library at the farther end of it.

Providence had put Leonard Anthony, fourth Earl of Wichfield, into his bed with a chill upon the liver . . . and even the magnificent Lorrimore, the butler, was afraid afterwards to tell him of this interview. Helen uttered prayers of thanks for that, in the church of St. Paul, when next she went there; but her business at the moment was to tell John how unwelcome he was and what a sight he looked.

"He'll never forgive you, never; he's said so a hundred times. If he caught you here, he'd have you thrown into

the street. Oh, and how you are changed; your dreadful clothes, your hair. How can I believe you are my sister's child—how can I?"

John was hurt by this, for he had been very vain of his appearance formerly; and he had no idea how much he had changed during the wild months in Norfolk. And what was the matter with his hair after all? He was deeply wounded, but defensive none the less.

"I've been travelling," he said stubbornly; "Norfolk's a long way off. I can't do what you do, Auntie, for I haven't any money. As I told you in my letter, Gracie and I are almost starving and I want Uncle to get me a job. You don't want your relatives disgracing you. How can I help it when I haven't got five pounds in the world."

"But where's your money gone then? You had two thousand pounds from the foundry and your first wife says you robbed her of fifteen hundred pounds. What have you been doing with it, then? Speculating!"

"I never robbed her of a penny. She's a liar and worse. Married me when she knew she had a husband living. She was just a bad lot and everybody said so. I didn't make that mistake a second time, Aunt, and my present wife's as good a woman as there is in all England."

"A publican's daughter—Wichfield says so—what's the good of talking about virtue in such a case? People don't open their doors to virtue. . . ."

"No, they're such snobs and I know it. But Gracie's father comes of one of the oldest families in Ireland——"

"They told you that! You poor, credulous fool! Why, he comes from Philadelphia and is a common charlatan. Wichfield found it all out and you'd better not talk to him of 'old Irish families.' He knows. He says he will never see you again and he means it. I wouldn't advise you to go near him."

"But, Aunt, I must live. What would people say if they heard that Lord Wichfield's nephew was starving? That would be a pretty scandal, wouldn't it?"

"It might be if you knew anybody important enough who'd listen to you. But you don't. You've no friends and do you think the tittle-tattle from a low public house is going to be repeated by anybody who is anybody? Everybody has poor relations and most have those who try to disgrace them as well. I wouldn't count too much upon that. You must depend on yourself now. Can't you get some work, some sort of honest employment? You were at Cambridge. Surely, you could do something if only to go out as a schoolmaster."

John took the whining tone. He knew that his dear aunt was Irish and full of sentiment.

"I'm so shabby," he pleaded; "how can I find work in these old clothes? If I had the money to rig myself out, I'd do what you say and then I wouldn't be a trouble to you. We're almost desperate as it is and I don't know where the next shilling is coming from."

"Is this publican man in the same state, then? Can't he help his beloved daughter?"

"He cannot and that's as true as God"—he'd caught that pretty expression from Jeremy Hooker—"the hotel's a failure and we don't dare take in any guests because we haven't the money to buy proper food for them. My father-in-law sold the very last of his late wife's possessions a week ago and he only got four pound ten for as fine a set of aquamarines as I've ever seen. I've hardly tasted decent food myself for a month and, oh, Aunt, it wears a man out, it breaks his heart."

And then, with all the pretty touch of that melodrama which the vanished Emily Morton had taught him, he cried:

"What shall we do? God help us! What shall we

do?"—and as he uttered those moving words, the tears came into his eyes and he wept.

The result of it all was hardly satisfactory to John; but he did leave Brighton with his dear aunt's cheque for a hundred pounds in his pocket, and as he read it over for the second time his profound sense of gratitude moved him to the touching reflection: "The mean old bitch—a hundred pounds—damn her eyes and she's got hundreds of thousands . . . the mean old——"

And so on and so on, as he lurched towards the railway station, complaining.

CHAPTER XXVII

JEREMY HOOKER TRIES HIS HAND

THINGS went from bad to worse at the "Erin Arms"; and by the time Gracie had brought an alarming baby boy into the world, there was a state of crisis in the household.

In vain John wrote letter after letter to his dear aunt and to his equally dear sister.

He had acquired the begging-letter writer's style by this time; and tried every note, from that of unexpected piety to the grotesquely lachrymose.

> "Dearest Aunt,—You can't see us starve. Don't you understand there's a baby in the house and we *must* have help. Such a fine boy and so like the family. I've walked the leather off my boots and nobody will have me. Aunt, dear, for God's sake help us and remember that as you do to others so will God do to you."

Auntie replied in driblets. She began with an occasional twenty-pound note and finished up with fives. The Earl got to hear of it and threatened the fellow alternatively with the horsewhip and the police. "You've chosen the sty and you may wallow in it," was one of his pleasant admonitions. A cunning fellow, my lord, who believed rightly that John Blake was likely to be far less troublesome in the wilds of Norfolk than amid the echoes of the great city of London.

Thus it went on until the baby was actually born and the tragedy of things approached its crisis. Desperation

now moving the little household to hunger and to wrath, Jeremy Hooker decided to take a hand in the begging and to visit Wichfield himself.

"I'll see the Earl," he said, "he shall hear the story from me that is the equal of any man. I'll talk to him as one that has the right. 'Tis shameful that he should be behaving to us as though we were strangers. Not an invitation to the Castle, my bhoy, since you entered my family. Am I a hathen, then? Does he know nothing of the Christian religion, blast him?"

John was not an authority on Christianity and though he feared greatly for the reception which his father-in-law would get at the Castle, he knew that no words of his could keep that wild, if spurious, Irishman from the adventure.

Just five days later, in fact, Jeremy Hooker, who had been a day and a half upon the journey, arrived at the "Wichfield Arms" upon the morning of a dull day of February and, having already drunk much whisky by the way, stopped at the inn to take more before daring to present himself to so tremendous a personage as the fourth Earl of Wichfield, Baron of Quainton, and member of Her Majesty's most honourable Privy Council.

Watley, the landlord of the inn, disliked both the look and the talk of the fellow from the beginning and sent one of the stable-boys running up to the Castle to warn Mr. Lorrimore, the butler, that such a person had arrived.

"Says he calls himself an Irishman and claims to be a relative—a drunken kind of a man with shabby clothes on his back and the boots almost falling off his feet. When you come back, ask Roberts, the constable, to step round, for I may have need of him. Now, slip away, my lad, and sharp about it. I'll try and keep the rascal here until Mr. Lorrimore comes down."

The lad went off like a hare awakened and Watley returned to his bar, where Jeremy Hooker was telling two

gaping wagoners what a fine fellow he was and how very pleased his kinsman, the Earl, would be to see him.

"Bedad, I'm a man after his lordship's own heart. There isn't a horse in Warwickshire I wouldn't get on the back of, an faith, I'll shoot with any man in the county for a wager. A great riding family we always were, and by Jasus, the cups I've brought home when my legs were younger. 'Twas for that his lordship wrote to me so kindly the day me dearest daughter entered into his family. 'We like the same things and our forbears have fought for king and country,' says he. 'Twas true, gentlemen, as all the history books will tell ye."

The wagoners were a little puzzled by the use of the word "gentlemen," but they only said "ay" and continued to drink the good ale for which Jeremy had paid. Watley, the landlord, listened with a sour smile at the corner of his capacious mouth, but he said little. A pretty scandal this in an Earl's family. The story of it would be all over Warwickshire in three days' time."

"I don't know what you want with his lordship," he said presently, "but, whatever it is, you'll not get it to-day, for he's away to London on the king's business. Better go back, sir, and come another time, I should think——"

Jeremy, notwithstanding the liquor he had drunk, looked a little worried at this, but he was not easily daunted.

"In London did you say? The pity of it. There would have been no man he would have been gladder to see. I shall see her ladyship and she will tell me so."

"Her ladyship happens to be in London too, so I'm afraid you've been wasting your time. There's nobody up at the great house at all, Lord Quainton being with his regiment and the Lady Edith in London. Should come again another day if I were you, sir."

Jeremy did not take it kindly.

"Bad cess to it and me come all the way from Norfolk

to see them. They were here Sunday, the papers said so. Ye'll be mistaken, perhaps, my man, and I'll find one of them if I go up. Faith, 'tis a pretty thing for me to have to say that, related to them as I am, I have never seen their great house. I'll just be stepping up there anyway and leaving me card upon them."

Watley could not stop him, but he could reflect sardonically upon the good fortune of my lord's absence, he having been summoned to the office of the Privy Council in Whitehall upon an affair of urgency. Her ladyship had insisted upon going too, since Wichfield was far from well and his heart latterly had not been as sound as it might be.

"You'll find me dead in the railway carriage some day," he said upon one occasion of an attack and she rejoined: "Oh, my dear, not in a railway carriage, I do hope"—and this was not meant unkindly, but as a tribute to his position. She was really a warm-hearted Irish lady, as Jeremy Hooker loved to remember.

"A fellow-countrywoman, God bless her," he used to exclaim to his admiring hearers in Norfolk. He said the same thing at the "Wichfield Arms."

As it happened, butler Lorrimore met him in the drive as he half-walked and half-staggered up the long carriageway to the Castle, and butler Lorrimore was certainly an impressive figure when he wore his tall silk hat and his smart morning coat as he did upon this occasion, having hastily donned such attire upon hearing of the visitor.

For a moment Jeremy thought he was the Earl and took off his hat and made a profound bow and addressed him as your lordship. Then a dim recollection of John's portrait of Wichfield coming to his mind he perceived his mistake and corrected it.

"I'll be after apologizing, sir, now that I see my error," he explained, "'twas his lordship surely I thought to see coming down the drive. Ye must excuse me for a stranger

to this house, though I should not be, close relative of the family as I am."

Lorrimore was far too clever a man to give himself away to this befuddled individual and he merely said:

"Lord Wichfield is away—Lady Wichfield also. We show the Castle only on Wednesday afternoons in the summer and then the admission is a shilling—benefit of the 'ospital in Warwick. You'd better come another time —have I the honour of your name, sir?"

"Ye don't know me, man! Why! my daughter married the Earl's nephew and faith, I'm related to them. 'Tis not to me ye'll be saying that the Castle is only to be seen in the summer afternoons for a beggarly shilling——"

"Indeed and it is, sir, and by his lordship's express orders. 'If that gentleman comes'—he said, thereby meaning you, sir, 'I am not at home at any time.' Indeed, sir, my injunctions was positive—to show you out as I'm now about to have the pleasure of doing."

Jeremy was staggered but not wholly surprised.

Adventurers ever hope for the best; but are always aware of the pitfalls.

He was discovered, that was all.

"This b—— Earl" as he told John afterwards, evidently had been making secret inquiries about him. "Into the very chamber of my tears," as he put it pathetically.

And then he would add: "Damn him, if I had him from behind a hedge, I'd shoot him like my forefathers did. To insult me, Jeremy Hooker, that is as well-born as any blasted earl in the kingdom. Lucky for him that he wasn't at home that day or I'd have smashed his head in, so help me Jasus."

His speech invariably broadened with anger and he found oaths foreign to him in placid times.

They did say afterwards in Wichfield that his departure was not as peaceable as might have been hoped; for getting

into an argument with a couple of my lord's grooms, after he had bought them and himself various samples of Watley's whisky, he made the mistake of using an offensive epithet about her ladyship and was immediately washed in the horse-trough at the door of the inn. The truth of this anecdote is dubious—but one fact is sure, that he caught a terrible cold in Warwickshire, took to his bed upon his return to Norfolk and three weeks afterwards was buried in Fritton churchyard, to the exceeding sorrow of his loving daughter but to the complete satisfaction of everybody else.

Poor John Blake, fortune surely had touched its very nadir for him.

And yet, ironically, that time was in some poor measure, a time of change and of a new life for him, wherein at least his bread was to be earned.

An old sportsman, Bob Blackman, a right good fellow, used to come to the inn to fish and shoot . . . and, occasionally, it must be admitted with shame, to lead to the bridal bed there some nymph from his establishment in Clifford Street, where he vended most substantial tweed overcoats for men and garments not less desirable for ladies. Bob's brides had not always the same coloured hair, which might have been an embarrassment to any other but Jeremy—but he, saintly man, would not hear of immorality, "and," says he: "'tis the dye stuff that is so wonderful these days and the ladies always changing the colour of their hair as the fashion is."

Blackman was very sorry for John Blake and discussed divers plans for helping him. The last of them was better than the first and it embraced a scheme to take John into his famous house and there to make of him a shopwalker.

"The son of an Earl, by old Harry, a good notion," said he; and the more he contemplated it, the more he liked it. John could write to all his noble uncle's friends and persuade them to buy overcoats. Bob saw himself covering

the nakedness of half the peerage and was delighted at the prospect.

So he made the offer.

He would rig John out in good shopwalker's clothes and pay him five pounds a week. He might bring his wife up to London and there take a lodging for her and the baby. To such a man, it never occurred to ask what Lord Wichfield would say or what he would do.

John, himself, was glad enough to accept such an offer and Gracie cried with delight at the thought of seeing London. Her father had left her a poor bit of furniture with one or two pieces which would have fetched money at a later date, and to this the fond lady clung almost passionately.

"It reminds me of him," she would say, perhaps thinking of the eight-day clock at which Jeremy used to throw quart pots when he was drunk, or that family Bible upon which he stropped his razors on the Sabbath.

This happy arrangement endured just three months.

Papa, mama and baby went to a lodging in Highgate and John rode to the West End every morning upon the top of a "knife-board" omnibus which rumbled over the stones of the Hampstead Road and arrived, after a seemingly interminable journey, at Oxford Circus.

The fellow made an excellent salesman and could talk enough sport to sell a good many "ulsters" to "Mr. Winkles" and others, who pretended to be sportsmen but were not. This success he reported to his dear aunt, with results which were surprising. The Earl came near to having a stroke and, "never in all my life," said the shocked butler Lorrimore, "did I hear such expressions from his lordship's mouth."

"A tailor—great God, what have I done that such a fellow should claim kinship with me? Why, all London will be talking of it. 'A tailor,' they'll say, 'your nephew, Wichfield, I must get a pair of trousers there—are his overcoats really what he says—does he cut well?' That's

the kind of talk I shall hear. Oh, hell and damnation, may the devil take him! You must stop it, Helen, stop it, stop it, stop it. He's a blackmailer; he's done this to blackmail me. Get a low-class lawyer. Buy him out. Throttle him—shoot him—do something. A tailor . . . my nephew . . . my damnable relative . . . that I should have lived to hear it."

Poor Helen did not know what to do, so she wrote to Freddy Wharton, Lucy's husband, and asked him if he could help.

Freddy was a true soldier, always willing to rescue damsels in distress, whatever their age, and of course he came to Helen's rescue instantly.

Previously, however, he had laughed uproariously—and this annoyed patient little Lucy very much—for how could she help having such a brother and why did Freddy try to make her cry about it? The good fellow kissed her upon this—a model couple indeed they were—and brought her a diamond and turquoise bracelet when he returned from London, after seeing Isidore Rosenstein—leading partner in that firm of Rosenstein, Abraham & Moss—that never lent anybody any money—oh, dear no—not at all—certainly not.

"There, dear old girl," he said; "there's something to make you forget about John"—and so he kissed her again—a pretty pair of lovers though so many years had rolled by.

"Did you see the lawyer, Freddy?"

"Did I see him? Old Rosenstein that used to do the bills for us when I was in the regiment. Many an I.O.U. of mine he's held and didn't the dear old Dad say something when he heard about it! Yes, I saw him all right and he bagged his bird without any trouble at all. John is to have five hundred a year on condition he doesn't live within fifty miles either of London or Wichfield and engages in no occupation which a gentleman should not follow. Helen

assented by telegram to do that and I've put in an offer on my own account. We ought to do something, Lucy, for we've a devil of a lot of money and perhaps we've been rather slack about it, now haven't we?"

"I never showed you half the letters I received from John," said she, "they were such humbug. He told me the most dreadful stories and his whining was more than I could stand. But I did send him a hundred pounds last year—I'm sure that's as much as he deserved."

"It's more. The fellow's a bad lot and nothing will make him different. That can't be changed, unfortunately. What I've done is to offer him the cottage we bought at Broadstairs last year. The children didn't like the place and I thought it a dull hole—let him go there and we'll get that pretty little bungalow you saw at Sheringham. If the kiddies must have a house near the sea, they can't do better. Sheringham's just a village, but it is a village and you know what that Norfolk air is like. Thanet is just spoiled by those damnable wagonettes."

"Oh, don't say 'damnable,' Freddy. I do hate to hear you swear."

"Well, 'accursed,' then, you pretty moralist."

"Did John accept the offer readily?"

"Like a trout at a mayfly. He's a lazy devil and honest work is the last thing he wants. He can get drunk all day at Broadstairs if he likes and sleep it off on the sands, the place only costs me forty pounds a year and he can call that our contribution to the common fund."

Lucy agreed. She was not ungenerous, but, like other good women, she was always terribly afraid that some day Freddy might lose his money and her darling children be left penniless. For which reason her attentions to John had been "unremitting" though she had even been heard to call him a "great lazy lump who deserved no consideration whatsoever."

In this manner between them they settled John Blake.

He went willingly enough to Broadstairs and there settled down to the dignity of ease if not the ease of dignity. The drinking habit he mastered in some measure and was rarely intoxicated except on Sundays and holidays. Gracie for her part, continued to produce infants with alarming regularity: and before she knew where she was she had a son at the church school in the village, for which educational advantage she paid exactly threepence a week. There was little talk of the Earl or of Wichfield at this time.

John found that it paid him better to hold his tongue.

Otherwise, people asked nasty questions, and obviously, came to the opinion that he, John, was a bad lot—if not, why had his renowned family deserted him?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TRAGEDY AT THE FOLIGNY

Sophie was very pleased with her resolution to devote her whole life to her little daughter; but clearly they were early days to put it into practice. She did not send her Sophie back to the school in Baker Street but put her instead with the nuns of the Perpetual Adoration at Asnières, saintly sisters who taught the little dear to sing hymns to the Blessed Virgin and made her take her bath in a sheet lest she should see her own body.

Sophie went on with her collaboration and really she made a good deal of money by it, to the great displeasure of Bellamy Renshaw, that envious misogynist, whom jealousy scoured like a pestilence though he would have been the last to admit the fact.

For him, René Chasserel was just a common little man with a gift of writing tuneful music and making love to the women. He, Renshaw, possessed neither art. Women's souls he could worship but not their bodies. Some day, perchance, some woman would change all that, but the day had yet to come.

For this reason, when Sophie told him of her plans, he was frankly unsympathetic and he annoyed her by some very plain talk, the partial truth of which she could not deny.

"Your maternal instinct is your trouble. You can't conquer your old weakness. I don't think you ever will. You ought to marry for the child's sake if you feel like that. Look at this little rat of a man, Chasserel! Seduced by him!

All the place knows it. You've been seen too often. Suppose the little girl were fifteen years older, what would she think of it: what tale could you tell her? It's no good making all these plans for her education if this sort of thing is going on. You'll be trapped by a rascal some day and the child will be no better than an orphan. You know it's true. Why keep it from yourself?"

Sophie flared up at that.

"True or false, you've no right to talk to me like that. If there's a man born who can separate me from my child, I'd like to see him. And why shouldn't I have a lover? Is it an unusual thing in this country? Most of the women you know have half a dozen. Besides, René's not my lover. He's only a friend."

Renshaw laughed aloud at this.

"What an idea of friendship. A *bel ami* you pick up in a fourth-rate café and you take him home straight away. Do you think such a man will be faithful to you for more than five minutes? You know that he won't."

"And if he isn't, do you think I'd care? There's only been one man in my life I ever was in love with and that was Albert de Joinville, whom I knew at Longchamp. Oh, my dear man, do get love out of your head. I suffer René because he amuses me and because I work with him. We've got our new opera *Catherine* coming on at the Foligny next month and this would be a nice time to quarrel, wouldn't it?"

"I don't say 'quarre;' I say, 'behave.' Why don't you write something that will bring you credit? A comedy, a tragedy! This operetta stuff is of the gutter. Its fame written on a dish-cloth. You wave a lantern and a muck-rake in the air and the public cries, 'Bravo!' What a public! What culture!"

"Then the public must never be amused. I suppose it should get readings from Saint Beuve at two sous a time.

Do you think the world really is very wrong when it says that most culture is humbug? Why is it more improving to hear about Catherine in the pages of Voltaire than on the stage of the Foligny? She was a prostitute anywhere. Why are we wrong to imagine the funny side of it?"

"You are wrong because you lie. Truth is beauty. Keats said so."

"And died just afterwards. I've read the lives of some of those poets. Keats and Shelley and that sort, and a more dismal lot never existed. They never laughed—they were always thinking of flowers and nightingales and death. I don't think like that and I never will."

"Certainly not. You've no perception of truth and never had. Those men searched the mystic and the transcendental——"

"And they never found it. You, yourself, are always searching and what have you got?"

"I have got the belief that none of us knows anything."

She laughed aloud at that and went back to her René and her "Catherine."

The opera was spectacular and there were to be a hundred women on the stage in one scene. The Russian dresses were magnificent in their fur and tinsel and a "palace on fire" was to be the blazing curtain of the second act.

René said that two hundred such legs had never been seen on any one stage in Paris before and that they alone would be the foundation of success.

It was all very exciting and Sophie plunged headlong, so to speak, into that glittering mêlée. Actually she took a room at the little Hôtel de Bard that she might be near the theatre. She and René were together at all hours of the day and night but there was no leisure for love-making. That would come after, when their hopes of a glorious *Première* had been realized.

Twenty-four hours before this momentous event, Father Arthur arrived at Asnières and asked for Sophie.

He had often promised to come but there had been troubles for the High Churchmen at home and some of them had gone to prison for wearing chasubles and lighting candles; other devout Christians believing that faith in Christ depended upon not wearing such things.

Father Arthur fought a magnificent battle in the interests of his brethren and the bishops were put to shame by him on more than one occasion.

There came a day, however, when he remembered Sophie and his promise to her.

Sometimes he felt almost as though it had been one of his own children who thus had gone astray. From the day she came to him to confess to a murder she had not committed to that other day when she had brought him her baby girl, she had never been long out of his thoughts. And now she had been at Asnières for two years and he had had but a couple of letters from her. Yes, truly, it was his duty to see her if only for the child's sake.

Her old dame, Martha, who looked after the flat, appeared to be very surprised that a priest should knock upon their door, but she made his reverence a seemly curtsy and told him, very volubly, that "Madame was in Paris at the Hôtel de Bard but that 'la petite' was with the good sisters at the convent," to which she obligingly indicated the way.

The Father wore cassock and bands for his visit and, naturally, the old woman supposed that he was a Catholic as did the sisters at the convent when he presented himself there. Very willingly did they assent to his seeing little Sophie but it was the hour for Benediction—and so they showed him to a stall in their pretty little chapel and he watched the children trooping in: saw pale-faced women, some of great beauty, prostrating themselves before a gorgeous altar and listened to childish voices singing *O Salutaris*

Hostia. How very like it was to the vision of heaven that his dreams had opened to him!

Afterwards the priest, the Abbé Gurgat, came into the little parlour to talk to him and was not disturbed at all when he found that Arthur St. Just was not of Roman obedience.

"Madame Hart-Brown told me something of the kind," he said suavely, speaking, of course, in French, of which Father Arthur, a Jersey man, naturally was a master; "but really there is so little between us since we both believe in Christ and the precious Blood. Sometimes you Catholics of the Church of England will see that they must join us and then we shall all worship God together as we ought to do."

Father Arthur said he hoped so devoutly and then went on to speak of Sophie and the little girl. The Abbé shook his head at the mention of the mother, but of her daughter he spoke with enthusiasm.

"A bright child, Father—she learns very quickly and is interested. Too much imagination for her age, perhaps, but very quick. I don't think she will ever have a vocation for religion, but time will show. She is happy in being here, however. You do not know Asnières—no? Perhaps it is as well that you should not. These so-called Bohemians here do not think enough even to be honest pagans. Christ for them is but a picturesque figure to be put into their poems and their pictures. They go to the foot of the Cross with a paint brush in their hands. There is no moral falling away for they are already fallen. How can I pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten the minds of those who have no minds? For them eternity is but a bubble of thought, which they toss to and fro in their talk, like an air balloon at supper-table. You will understand what I fear for any child reared in this place. What must happen to her when our control is gone? Who will protect her then?"

"Surely her mother, Abbé! She cannot be insensible to

the dangers of which you speak. Is not she the proper person?"

The Abbé shook his head.

"You have known Madame Hart-Brown a good many years, I think?"

"Yes, more than twenty, certainly."

"Is it your opinion that she is likely to be a safe guide for a child already showing great interest in what they are pleased to call 'The World of Art,' and talking like a woman of twenty of plays she will write and the parts she will play?"

Father Arthur was perplexed.

"I hoped to see Madame here. She has gone to Paris to produce a new play, I understand."

The Abbé shrugged his shoulders in a gesture at once of pity and contempt.

"A new play! A concourse of half-naked women, say rather—and a jingle of tunes that will be rattled off presently by an *orgue de Barbarie*. Call it not a play, sir. Speak if you will of empty nonsense and devil's wit and I shall understand you."

Father Arthur was too much a man of the world to take this narrow view.

"I suppose the world will always ask for the sunshine while it walks in the shadows. We have this sort of entertainment in London but there are many honest people engaged in it. I imagine Madame Hart-Brown really does it for the excitement of the thing. The husband left her a great deal of money. She cannot have the excuse of want."

"She has no excuse. She should think of the child. Let her leave Sophie here as long as possible and we will do our duty by her. She, herself, has no religion. She never comes to Confession or the Blessed Sacrament. She prays only when she is in trouble—'Lord make this rubbish of mine a success!' That's the kind of faith she practises.

No, Father, you should see that we have the little Sophie with us until her eighteenth year. Then we can answer for her."

Father Arthur said that he would do his best—incidentally, also, he accepted an invitation to dinner from the hospitable Abbé.

"I have some fine Mouton Rothschild," explained that benevolent priest, "and as good a cigar as there is in Paris. You will be very dull here and I insist that you come. Meanwhile, if you would like a word with the child——"

"I should like it very much;" and so they brought the little Sophie down to him.

She wore a plain black dress with a very large Eton collar and cuffs to match it. There was the drawing of a woman's face in pencil upon one of these cuffs—and for that work of art, Sophie would have to do penance presently. Her hair promised to be the same shade of warm chestnut as her mother's and her eyes were amazingly bright. She spoke as it were staccato, but often stopped to think before she spoke and thus to intimate that already she wished to reason things out for herself.

"Ha, Sophie, you remember me."

She looked at him quite a long while before she answered:

"Yes—we went in a train to a place where there were trees. You made mother cry."

"Ah, but she doesn't cry now, does she?"

"Oh, no, she sings and laughs and dances. I am going to do that when I am bigger. Mother's at the theatre. It's beautiful. All lighted up and gold and silver. She says I shall be there some day. They'll make me a princess and I shall ride on a white horse. I dream of it all sometimes when I am asleep."

She paused as though to reflect upon the dream while the priest watched her curiously.

How like her mother she was and yet how unlike.

Imagination but not hysteria of imagination—desire but not impulse—great determination and possibly the mother's will but not the mother's weakness. He had hopes for her already.

"So you want to be a princess on a white horse. But, dear child, you have so much to learn, so much to do, before that day comes."

"Oh, I know, I know. I must learn to sing and to dance. I have begun already for Sister Agnes is teaching me. I will show you how I dance the minuet. It is like this—it goes so——"

It was pretty to see her capering about that bare room, saints and angels in the pictures upon the dingy walls and the hard carpetless floor for her tiny feet. Father Arthur watched her and again fell to his prophecies. "The child had a future. Would her mother help her to make or mar it? Time alone would show."

He left her with a promise to send some books about princesses on white horses—and, even of more importance, some *marrons glacés* to which she was addicted but often denied. His dinner with the Abbé was jovial and the wine all that the good priest declared it to be. And he went back to the little hotel at an early hour, being ignorant, unfortunately, of that bright game of écarté in which the French clergy were always willing to indulge.

"I shall see Madame at the Hôtel de Bard to-morrow," he said as he was leaving, "and I will have a good talk to her. She certainly should leave little Sophie with the Sisters or at some other school as good. I approve of her being educated as a Catholic although I am not one myself. For girls especially—its moral value is unquestionable. I have rarely known a Catholic girl go very wrong. I wish I could say the same for some Anglicans—and for others. You Catholics get a grip upon them somehow. Believe me, I have never begrudged you your success."

The compliment was well received and he left the Abbé very pleased.

Asnières was just beginning its nightly orgy as he walked home and he saw many sights which would have shocked the old-fashioned parson.

Cafés had lighted up their crude gas flares by this time and crazy pianos set unsteady feet dancing. The women were mostly of the grisette order and some were little milliners—others but brazen strumpets who preyed upon the artists.

None drank heavily but there was a great deal of open cuddling at the little stone-topped tables and some of it was outrageous in its boldness. One café, finely named as the Café de Diane de Poitiers, boasted that none but ladies, *toutes nues*, waited upon its patrons, while another promised a puppet show of Solomon and his wives. These women were for Father Arthur just as so many cattle in a pen. A great gulf separated him from such a life. It did not even suggest temptation, and he went home to his prayers and his bed just as though he were at his convent and would awake next morning to hear the Angelus ringing.

Next day he set off to Paris to discover Sophie *mère* but met with many disappointments.

There had been a *répétition générale* the previous day, but it had not been wholly a success and some of the principals had returned to the theatre that morning to practise those numbers which were shaky.

"Madame Philip," as the concièrge called her drolly, was attending these rehearsals, and he could not say whether she would or would not be back to *déjeuner*. Better then, perhaps, to defer the whole thing until to-morrow, Arthur St. Just thought, and so he determined to give the day to sight-seeing and to walk abroad in that city of Paris he had not seen for so many years.

It was greatly changed—different already from that

rich and prosperous city which the Second Empire had created.

True, Hausmann's boulevards had now matured both their trees and their buildings and were very handsome. The shops in the Rue de la Paix, also, looked uniformly prosperous, and English husbands with American wives gazed into their windows covetously. There were richly-dressed women praying in the garish Madeleine and others, neither rich nor devout, who just sat and watched but certainly did not pray. Father Arthur, himself, said a prayer for little Sophie before the altar of the Blessed Sacrament and then walked on towards the Champs Elysées and the Bois. The manners of the people were not what they had been in the days of the Empire, he thought. More than one apache spat as he passed and muttered an obscenity. To many, clericalism was still the enemy.

In the Bois, there were many carriages but not all of them satisfying to English eyes.

Here, you would see a pair of beautiful horses in harness that was not beautiful. There, a "turnout" would be spoiled by a shabby footman, who looked as though he had borrowed a coat from a second-rate theatrical wardrobe for the occasion. A few young men rode magnificent horses magnificently and thus mocked the common English opinion that the French were not equestrians. There were few women riding, though some brought tricycles to the Bois and these ladies wore breeches.

"Why not," said the priest to a lady on the sidewalk, who cried "shame" upon the practice. And then he added:

"I have seen things much less desirable since I came to Paris."

The lady made no reply and the priest went back to the Grand Hotel to lunch.

Here, in the famous courtyard, were the nationalities almost of the civilized world. Chinamen munched duck *à*

la Joseph while sturdy Japanese ate rice from bowls. There were Turks in great red breeches and superb turbans; men from Algiers wearing the burnous; Indians whose food was evidently paid for by the pretty white women in their company; smart officers of Zouaves—priests by twos and threes, all that cosmopolitan life of Paris represented and magnificently fed. Arthur St. Just liked to imagine all these people as they lived in their own countries and he would have been interested to hear what they thought of this garish city, with its virtues and its vices, its men of genius and its children of the gutter.

After lunch, he spent an hour in Notre Dame, deploring the dust and poverty of some of the side altars and trying to imagine the fane as it had been in the glorious days.

An obtruding guide told him that the Emperor Napoleon the Third had done much to restore the beauty of the great cathedral, but that since his flight and death all had again fallen to neglect.

"The deputy," he explained, "the gentlemans, that is, who goes to the Chamber, he steal everything for the good of the nation and so he say *Vive la République !* No good in this place: you come with me across the streets and I will shown you where the great Queen, Miss Marie Antoinette sat the night before they cut off her head. She cry very much then for they cut off her hair, and the lady, she is not very beautiful when her hair is not on the head—*hein !* You come into the prison and I show you—the Conciergerie *là bas*—and Monsieur l'Abbé, I am born Catholique as the Benedictine fathers will tell you."

St. Just gave him a franc, but he did not see the chair wherein the beautiful Marie Antoinette sat waiting for her death.

The day had rather tired him and he felt that he was growing old. A couple of hours, however, upon his bed at the Hôtel de Bard somewhat refreshed him and when he

had dined at a little café in a little street near the opera house, he chanced to ask the waiter, if he knew anything of the Théâtre Foligny and of the new operetta to be played there that night.

The man was most willing to oblige so condescending an Abbé and an Englishman moreover, and his tongue was loosed immediately.

"The new operetta, certainly, sir, it is by our new musician, Monsieur Chasserel, who was at the little café in the Boulevard des Italiens not a year ago. So clever a man—and one of us since he conducted our orchestras. Now he is famous—America, Europe, London, Paris, Vienna—they all know him. And the libretto, yes, by an English lady—extraordinary—so French, she speaks and writes our language so perfectly. It is very fine this new opera, I understand—but a little naughty as all such operas are. Monsieur, of course, would not be going to such a theatre—but the Foligny is just at the beginning of the Boulevard Montmartre—a very old house, built when the great Napoleon was Emperor. All the *haut monde* goes there—people are accustomed to a little spiciness and they expect it at such a theatre. Ah, well, I wish them success to-night and I am sure that Monsieur l'Abbé does the same."

Father Arthur said that he did and the talk much amused him.

After dinner, it being a beautiful night of the late summer, he set out for a little walk along the Boulevards and, insensibly almost, directed his steps towards the Foligny. A cigar would have helped him: but he had a prejudice against priests smoking in the streets, and so he just clasped his hands behind his back and strolled along leisurely, looking as it were all the world in the face and refusing to find it evil.

And this was his attitude, when a loud cry from the driver of a *fiacre* upon his side of the Boulevard aroused his attention and he stopped dead in his walk to see what had

happened. Then he perceived that many people were running eastward and all exclaiming and crying as they ran. Panic appeared to have afflicted this multitude and a desperation quite incomprehensible, until he heard the cabman almost shriek his news again and point to the scene of it.

"Théâtre de Foligny—don't you see—Holy God it's on fire, on fire. Monsieur l'Abbé the theatre is on fire!" Arthur St. Just looked where the man pointed. He saw a great black building with a garish gas-flare above it.

But from the roof of this building, great tongues of flame were already leaping and it was evident beyond all doubt that the theatre was on fire.

CHAPTER XXIX

THAT TERRIBLE AFFAIR

It had begun at the middle of the second act.

There was to have been a palace on fire for the climax of this, but while you waited for it they showed you a beautiful garden and a *corps de ballet* dancing and maidens roaming about as though they feared the hot weather—these and the heroine singing an enchanting song to a catchy waltz tune and the hero coming in presently to tell her that he would die for her—as he had told her twenty times already since the orchestra ceased to play the overture. Such was the promise, but, alas, how different was the performance.

Sophie was sitting at that time in the little stage-box on the prompt side. Bellamy Renshaw was with her, though he had sworn he would not go—and another nymph from Asnières, whose supreme ambition it was to sleep upon Bellamy's heart—her own phrase and one of which she was very proud. At such a time, the philosopher relented and he had been good enough to observe at varying intervals that "the muck" was not bad.

"You're going to have a success, my dear," he would say from time to time, "just the stuff for these empty heads. Your women will be your missionaries. The 'latter end' and all that sort of thing. All Paris will come to see these legs. Look how the old men are loving it."

She was not annoyed. Bellamy was like that. The mere fact that he did not damn it encouraged her.

"But my book," she persisted, "you haven't said a word about it since the curtain rose?"

"Why should I? Doesn't it speak for itself?"

"And I call it a beautiful book," interjected the nymph, anxious to defend a sweet sister of whom she was not jealous. How could she be since it was so widely known that Sophie was the mistress of René Chasserel?

"A jolly book," she repeated; "the love-making's fine. Doesn't Berton kiss beautifully? He's made a study of that, I know."

Renshaw admitted the possibility.

"The fellow's something to look at anyway and he's got a voice. Most of you women have simian tastes when you choose your men. They go well with your chattering and most of them are up trees. The high heaven keep me from the 'men that women like.'"

The nymph did not know the meaning of the word "simian," so very wisely she held her tongue. Sophie, for her part, understood Bellamy quite well. He *did* like the operetta and he *was* amused. Otherwise he would have said so baldly and walked out.

"Admit that I have got some stage sense," she put it to him, "it hasn't dragged anyway—and three encores already! Berton and Adèle are going to get one for this duet. You wait and hear them."

Bellamy was just about to promise that he certainly would since there was no ready way of escape, when an ominous thing happened and a thrill of real alarm gripped the heart of many a man and many a woman in that vast audience.

A flake of fire fell almost upon the shoulder of Berton as he sang—and was by him brushed lightly aside as a man might brush a leaf that had blown upon him from a tree. But that flake was followed by another and another and, for an instant the voice of the singer quavered and he looked up anxiously at the battens above him. Of what he saw he did not speak to the audience. Just for a moment or two

the duet was continued. Then it ceased abruptly and Berton, quite calm now, advanced to the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said; "I am afraid we are on fire. But if you will all leave your seats quietly and go out of the theatre in your turn, no harm will happen to you." He could say no more.

From above, a great tongue of flame now leaped out into the auditorium and began to lap upon and to lick the woodwork of the proscenium.

Upon the stage itself, a hundred terrified chorus girls had begun to cry and to shriek and to run hither and thither in blind confusion. Berton himself dragged Adèle Fernay from the scene and his voice was heard above the uproar shouting those words of command the army had taught him; but to which none now listened. At the same moment, the audience stood up *en masse* and from the gallery came terrible cries and even screams. For the leaping flames had bridged the gulf and the very woodwork of the upper circles had burst into flame.

Bellamy Renshaw in the stage-box was the last to get up when his moment came and not for a moment did he lose his composure. Putting their wraps about the shoulders of the women he told them each to take one of his arms and by no means to attempt to hurry.

"Everybody on this floor will get to the street," he said, "the thing to do is to avoid panic. Cling to me, girls, and don't let go on any account. And don't mind what goes on upstairs. We can't help those poor devils. Let us help ourselves, then."

He passed into the corridor as he spoke and for a few paces until they came to the "sortie" from the stalls, the way was easy. There was a glimpse here of the stage, and when he looked back, Bellamy observed a fearful spectacle. Great masses of fire appeared to be falling everywhere. There were weird lights amid the burning—the greens and

violets and orange of the flaming scenery—the clear white of the gas which roared from many pipes and made monstrous jets which devoured and devasted wherever they fell.

This inferno was now unpeopled, for the company had fled to the exits, where hundreds of corpses were found next day, burned until they seemed to be but blackened logs of wood, unrecognizable and inhuman.

The distant shrieking of the doomed was heard as Bellamy passed by the barrier of the stalls as the wailing and the woe of a storm afar. Somebody turned off the gas and the chords of terror were now struck in the auditorium itself. From the furnace of the stage not a human voice was to be heard.

Fire was falling by this time actually upon the people in the stalls. Women brushed the white hot flakes from their shoulders and cried "Oh, oh," as they did so. Men uttered fierce oaths when sparks burned their eyes or the fire was blown into their very mouths.

Bellamy always remembered the spectacle of a pretty girl of twenty, whose white bodice was burning and who tore madly at her burning breasts. The hair of another was singed and the smoke of it enveloped her head. A few had fainted and men were carrying them. One clung to her seat frantically, crying: "*Je ne bouge pas, je ne bouge pas.*" It remained for a few stout fellows, soldiers chiefly, to shout "*Du calme, du calme.*" Nobody appeared to believe their promise that all would be saved if order were kept.

The press was heavy at the juncture of the ways and there were moments when Sophie, despite her courage, felt that she was upon the point of fainting. By her side in the strife and stress of these fugitives from death was an immensely fat woman who laughed a little hysterically as she sought to elbow her way along the corridor and cried without ceasing: "*J'ai des enfants—j'ai des enfants.*" A man beside her fought like a lion to heave this great ship through the

obstructing human waves and trampled without a thought upon the faces of those who fell. He was beaten by the woman's very terror, for, perceiving an iron grille which led into a bar, she mistook it for an exit and clung to its bars desperately. Even her stout cavalier could not move her. She died where she stood—suffocated by the press.

Bellamy Renshaw's policy was not to hurry.

He closed his arms firmly about the two women and thus protected them from the anger and the fury of the panic-stricken. Step by step he advanced when the crowd advanced—but he did not push. At last, he came to the dangerous stairway—but five steps and those leading to the lobby beyond which was air and life. The audience from the circles here flowed into that from the stalls, and memories of those scenes haunted the boldest until their death.

Many women died here, killed by fear and their hearts. Men, who had never struck a blow in their ordered daily life, now fought wildly with the fists and beat down even women in their path. One struck thus at Renshaw and hit him on the back of the neck, but a moment later his very fear caused him to trip and, as it were in an instant, the life was trampled out of him. People lacked all sense of pity in such a scene. Air—Light—Life. They were all but twenty paces away, yet who would reach them?

Sophie said afterwards that all her fear was not for herself but for the child.

All the time that the people were pressing upon her and the very breath seemed driven from her body, a vision of her little girl was before her, while a terrible sense of the possible meaning of this tragedy to little Sophie weighed upon her mind.

Who would befriend her? Who would bring her up and educate her?

The money was there, but would she get it? No will was made, she told herself, no will, no will. Why had she

been so negligent? All sorts of people might claim the child's portion, she thought. That terrible impostor, George Washington Addy; how if he came to England and declared he was her husband! The man was villain enough to do that. Oh, if she had only made a will! Let God spare her and she would do so to-morrow. She made a solemn vow upon that.

They were getting step by step nearer the principal entrance by this time and the helmets of the firemen and of the National Guard could now be seen in the vestibule.

Some of the danger came from the vast crowd of people who swarmed upon the roadways and impeded the work, alike of the brigade and the police.

Troops had been called out but it was some little time before even their horses could force the mob back to the pavements and the side-streets.

Bellamy, whose whole mind was given to that Augean task, did permit himself to say that it must be a great spectacle seen from outside! "We shall soon be there now," he added, "keep up your courage girls and don't try to go faster. Slow, slow, slow, just one step—another—that's good—the fire won't get us here—we are in the vestibule now—brave girls—well done—well done—don't look down—oh—God, that poor woman—blood, blood—why do they build such places—why do they let this happen. . . ."

Many of his exclamations were involuntary and he could blame himself afterwards for them. Sophie might never have seen that poor slip of a girl, trampled upon until her very face was unrecognizable, if Bellamy had not spoken. The sight was too much for her and the man felt her sink down upon his arm. Deftly now he caught her round the waist and made one supreme effort. A fireman at the door perceived his predicament and climbed high on the shoulders of those in front to lend him a hand. "*Venez, monsieur,*" the man cried, "*venez, venez*"—and

he exerted all his strength and, as a sailor hauling upon a sheet, he pulled the people out and made way for the derelicts.

"*Venez*," he continued to cry, but the fresh air of the night was blowing on their faces now. It was a very breath of heaven to them.

Safe—and yet not wholly safe.

High above them the theatre blazed like some mighty torch. There were flames, ironic streamers bursting from all the upper windows. The roof had now become a sheeting of fire and soon must fall. And all the time the mob howled and roared and cried the names of its friends within—as though they could answer and reassure. Even the survivors won little pity if none of those round about knew them, and they were regarded almost as traitors who had saved their own lives. Women, mad with dread, would approach such people and ask: "Is Lucille safe—have you seen my son Jacques?" Impotent but deserving of pity.

There was a priest among these people and some of the papers spoke next day of his heroism. How he went from group to group, befriending the weak and comforting the strong! The number of the poor burned creatures he helped to carry to cabs and carriages that they might be taken to the hospitals! The way he risked his own life, plunging into the burning theatre again and again and rarely failing to drag some half-fainting man or woman to air and safety.

By chance—if it were by chance—this priest saw Sophie Hart-Brown when Bellamy Renshaw, himself almost exhausted, laboured vainly to get her away from the rabble and to find some place of refuge. She recognized him at once and crying: "Father, Father," she clung to him as though, indeed, she were his child.

CHAPTER XXX

THE GUARDIANS

SOPHIE was sent by the doctors to a nursing home at Montreux on the shore of Lake Geneva; and there she lived for some three months after the terrible affair at the Foligny Theatre.

All Paris had talked of it for many weeks after that surpassing calamity and Sophie's name had actually appeared in the lists of the dead. The news went to the convent at Asnières but was not given to the child. The good sisters could not believe that anything so dreadful had happened. Madame Hart-Brown would communicate with them presently.

More then seven hundred people had been burned in that ancient theatre. It had been old and ill-designed and a veritable death-trap, the architects of Paris said. Nearly all those in the upper galleries had perished, while of the great company itself, but few were saved. So hemmed in by shops and houses the building had been that the firemen worked with the greatest difficulty. The theatre was doomed from the moment the sparks fell upon the shoulders of Berton the actor, and he ceased to sing.

Bellamy Renshaw had believed that all was well with his party, but no sooner had he entered a little pharmacy, where an active young American chemist did his best for the many poor people brought to him, than he discovered his mistake.

"Good God," he cried; "you are badly burned, my dear—but how, how—when did it happen to you?"

Father Arthur, who, of course, had come with them into the shop, could tell him that. A shower of burning flakes from the roof of the theatre had fallen upon Sophie as she tried to reach the open boulevard.

"Many were burned that way," he said, "I myself had fire on my clothes. We should get her to a hospital at once. It is not the present danger—shock is to be feared. If you know of any place. . . ."

Renshaw took a swift decision.

"There is a little hospital in the Place Monceaux—I was there once when my horse threw me in the Bois. Get a cab if you can, Father—offer him fifty francs. I've money on me—she's very bad; I can see that. A brave woman. She must have been in damnable pain."

The chemist's *chasseur* offered to aid in the search for some kind of vehicle and he and the priest went off together. It was an hour, however, before they returned and even then they had found but an open *fiacre*. Sophie, meanwhile, was obviously suffering terribly, but her courage sought to make light of it. Fire had fallen upon her shoulders. She was burned deeply both upon the arms and about her breasts. Indeed such was her agony that she fainted twice while waiting for the cab; and the young American was at his wits' end to help her.

"The quicker she sees a doctor, the better," he declared; "I guess I'm through with what I can do. People who build a crazy theatre like that should be put up and shot. I hope your friend won't be long, Mr. Renshaw—I don't like the look of her, and that's sure."

The cab came at last and Renshaw told the man where to go. His little friend, who had been of his party, had gone back to her home at Asnières, terrified by the tragedy and possessed only by an uncontrollable desire to get away from

these dreadful happenings. Renshaw found his "hospital" without difficulty and, secluded as it was, no other victim of the fire had yet discovered it. They got a doctor, after weary hours of waiting, and heard his grave opinion of the case. Like Renshaw, he feared shock and its results.

"She is very badly burned, sir—a woman of great courage not to make more of it. Of course, there can be no thought of moving her at present."

And then he asked with true French prudence:

"A lady of means, I suppose? I imagined as much by her appearance."

Renshaw reassured him on that point and then astonished him by suggesting that he and Father Arthur should spend the rest of the night in the little hospital.

"She's no friends in Paris," he explained; "if anything's likely to happen to her, we should be here. This is an English clergyman who has known her since her childhood. He will take charge of her affairs if the worst comes. You don't expect that, I suppose? You don't think she will die?"

Doctor Cheminez shook his head.

"In the case of fire, nobody can say what will happen. I will do my best. As to your remaining here, if Madame Carnot can have you, I shall be very pleased to hear it. Send for me at once if there is a crisis. It is that we have to fear."

Madame Carnot, the matron of the hospital, was quite content to turn innkeeper, her house being almost empty. She gave the two men rooms in the upper story whence they could look back over Paris from their windows and see the heavens still aglare with the ebbing flames from the Théâtre Foligny and imagine the terror of the scenes still being witnessed in its environs.

The search for the often unrecognizable dead amid the

press of the burning! Tragic grief and joy hardly less tragic. Bodies, whose charred faces were covered reverently, carried away in any vehicle that could be commandeered. Doctors working in their shirt-sleeves and at their wits' end for want of appliances. The Republican Guard, stiff and silent upon their frightened horses—the ebbing flames, the hissing of the water—the sobs and tears and prayers of entreaty—the name of God and the Blessed Virgin often uttered aloud. What a tale the newspapers would tell to-morrow! And all these poor people were looking into wonderland a few hours ago.

Arthur St. Just and Bellamy Renshaw remained for three days in the Place Monceaux. Sophie was a little better upon the fourth day but afflicted by a terrible dread of death, for which only shock could account.

All the details of her past life came to her in vivid order and she lived through them again but without that meticulous self-examination which the religious might have desired. Never once did she ask the kindly priest to give her absolution. Her anxiety was to convince herself that all she had done and all that had happened to her had been but the working of destiny. Herein Bellamy's philosophy was to be discovered and from him she found encouragement.

"Never turn back the pages of life," he would say; "that's Western and mumbo-jumbo. The Oriental teaches us that to-morrow must always be greater than to-day. What we have done ill, we may do well in some reincarnation—if there be reincarnation. Nothing will ever convince me that Sophie Hart-Brown did a really evil thing. She went, not where Fate pointed the finger but where it drove her headlong with irresistible hands."

And then he would exhort her to think only of getting well.

"Try to see light wherever you look—light, light. We all grope in this accursed darkness but rarely have the sense to try and lift the curtain. Say to yourself that you are going off to some place where the sun will shine all day and there will be a clear heaven at night. That's to-morrow—but the past is already in the black book of the dead. Don't let anybody tell you that it isn't, my dear. These priests live in 'yesterday.' If they couldn't resurrect it, their trade would be gone."

The teaching was unjust to Father Arthur, whose love of Dead Sea fruit was no greater than his own. If he prayed with Sophie, his prayer was simple. "Forgive us our trespasses. Oh, God, hear us for the sake of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. God save this Thy servant—help her in her affliction. Have her child in Thy gracious keeping."

She prayed with him and still must reflect upon past years.

Had some devil taken possession of her at her birth? Why had she thought that she could have saved her little stepbrother when a miracle alone could have snatched him from the rope? Why did she let Albert de Joinville seduce her? How different all might have been if God had been on her side. Clearly, evil had been her portion. The sins of the fathers—but what sins! Greville Fordacre was a snob, her mother just a happy-go-lucky woman of the shires; who had never done an evil thing in her life. Were these, then, the sinners for whose wrong-doing she had been thus afflicted?

She was a fortnight in the little hospital and, at the end of that time, Bellamy Renshaw had the idea that she would be wise to leave Paris and go to the south.

"Somewhere really warm and somewhere restful," he suggested; "I know a capital hotel at Montreux—Hôtel de Belle Isle—no noise there—you could have a room

right over the lake. It would be the very place for you."

"But, Bellamy, I couldn't leave Sophie. What would happen to her if anything happened to me? My God, the very thought of it frightens me. Will you take care of her, Bellamy, you and Father Arthur? Oh, yes, I know you won't refuse me."

And then to the priest: "Father, say that you will help Bellamy to look after little Sophie if I die. Say that you won't leave her alone."

The two men promised willingly—an odd alliance in guardianship, of the world and the devil may be—but never of the flesh. Little Sophie was to come to Montreux, of course, and the priest was to be her escort. Neither of them had had the courage to go to the convent during the days of doubt. But now they told the child and the sisters. She was to go to her mother. A nurse must be engaged. There had been a bad accident but all was now well again. Such news was naturally joyous. There were great rompings upon the part of a little girl who was already too serious for her years.

"Mother's well and we're all going to the lake, sister—just like the sea, big ships and waves and mountains with snow on the top of them. May I wear my pink dress there—yes, and my straw bonnet—and take my drawing things and my music? Oh, how beautiful that will be—how beautiful!"

The sisters told her that she should go and give thanks before the altar for her mother's safety—but Sophie's thoughts wandered afar.

A new land and freedom from this awful routine of praying and of classes! She would have her liberty to run and shout and dance. In the convent, they didn't let you do that. And she would have her dear mother always with her. Somehow, whenever Sophie tried to pray before

an image of the Madonna she found herself really praying to "Mother." And, of course, she was quite sure that "Mother" was without sin.

To such a child the journey south was an adventure in Paradise.

They had engaged a *coupé-lit*—there were no *wagons-lits* in those days—and a nurse from the hospital made one of the party.

Arthur St. Just and Bellamy Renshaw engaged a compartment for themselves and while the priest read Gladstone's attack on the Vatican, Bellamy read Zola's "Nana" until disgust wearied him and he threw it out of the window. "Mechanical filth" was his verdict and he recorded it afterwards in the *Figaro.* Arthur thought that Gladstone did not understand the Pope's meaning and although not a Catholic himself, he repudiated the idea that loyalty to the Church and loyalty to the country were incompatible. Secretly, Renshaw told himself that he "didn't care a damn either way."

The hotel of the Belle Isle was all that had been said of it and the bedrooms quite delightful. They had a fine view of the mountains and little Sophie clapped her hands when she saw the paddle-wheeled steamboats. "Mother has one of her own, hasn't she?" was the question put to Arthur. Proprietary rights both in steamships and mountains were assumed.

Here, then, was as odd a family as ever assembled in any hotel in Switzerland.

All day long when the hours were sunny, Sophie lay upon a couch on the balcony and watched the light on the mountains. A strange morbidity afflicted her, a disease of bodily surrender which perplexed even that clever Swiss physician Dr. Curlian, who attended her.

Speaking plainly to Arthur and Bellamy a week after they had arrived, he told them frankly that the case was

beyond him and that he had failed to diagnose the symptoms.

"Her wounds have healed quite well," he averred; "but her strength seems growing less almost every day. I do not detect any weakness of the lungs and the heart is quite sound. We could send her up to the mountains if you wished but truly I imagine she is better here. Has she no women relatives who would come out to her, by the way? They might do something for her which we men cannot do."

Arthur St. Just shook his head at the question, for he knew the truth.

A letter from him had gone to Lucy Wharton and had been answered in kindly terms. But no offer to come out to Switzerland had attended it. Freddy Wharton did not want "that kind of connexion" and his rare quarrels with Lucy had been provoked by Sophie's name.

"A thorough bad lot," he had declared more than once; "if she or her brat comes to this house, I go out. Why, in Paris, she was nothing better than a whore and took no pains to conceal the fact. Do you think I want such a woman here?"

Lucy, in her black cap, and with a fresh babe every twelve or fourteen months to keep her occupied, showed the obedience expected from such a wife—but her mind was often uneasy, and she would recall, in part with shame in part with pleasure, those old days of parties at Quainton when she and Sophie had lain in bed together and talked of men and the mysteries of life and other things about which the poor little noodles knew nothing at all, since nobody had been at the pains to enlighten them. She was very fond of Sophie then and believed that they would be friends through life.

How oddly had the years dealt with both of them!

When, therefore, it came to a question of Sophie's relatives, the answer to the question had to be in the negative.

That very week in which she went to Montreux her father died in Kensington and his exultant wife prepared to leave for Paris at an early date and there to make amends for that continence which English hypocrisy had imposed upon her. Sophie Hart-Brown was not even mentioned in Greville Fordacre's will. She never learned that, for she was dying when chance carried the news of her father's death to her own bedside.

What a mystery was this of the passing of the life of one who, for her child's sake, should have desired so ardently to live. Bellamy and Arthur used to walk frequently by the lakeside to talk of it—yet neither could offer a solution.

"She's sinking before our eyes, Arthur"—they had become "Arthur" and "Bellamy" to each other by this time—"and we're helpless as children in a nursery. The thought of dying terrifies her and yet she has not the will to live. Is there some great trouble on her mind, then? Is there a part we ought to know about? I'm asking you for no secrets of your calling—but if you can honestly tell us anything, it may help her. Good God, I'd give half I've got to save her, for a better little woman never breathed. And there she is, the leaves of her life falling one by one—as the leaves of the rose of yesterday."

Arthur heard him with sympathy. The mystery of little Greville Fordacre's death had been written about so much in the papers and Sophie's part in it so blazoned about that the secrecy of the confessional did not bind him in this case. Was that the clue to this insoluble mystery? Had Sophie fallen back into that mood which drove her to confess a murder she had not committed?

"It must have been a terrible thing in her life," he said when he had recalled the bare facts to Bellamy; "hysteria, no doubt. She is a woman of immense imagination. As a girl, she was affected by strange dreams and the most terrify-

ing visions. Her father knew that, but they never tried to help her at home. She lived in a world of her own and resented the oppressions. Wise teaching and training would have given her a beautiful character, I think. That dreadful tragedy ruined her whole career. There can be no doubt about it."

"But she didn't really do her brother any harm. There was never any question of that. The case was a long time ago—I was in America, I remember, but they made a lot of it there. She saw the kiddie hang himself and let the servant be charged. That was bad, rank bad—yet it might have been nerves, I see that."

"The shock of the whole thing! I'm as sure as I have been of anything in my life that it was shock which unhinged her mind and accounted for everything afterwards. She was terrified to the point of insanity. I thought and believed it had all passed—but has it? Sister Clare tells me that she frequently starts up in her sleep and cries out pathetically. I questioned her if a name were ever mentioned and she tells me no name but that of her little Sophie has ever escaped her lips. Yet why terror in that case? She must know how devoted we both are to the child. Surely, she does not doubt us!"

Bellamy shook his head.

"It's too much for me, Arthur. Such a gentle loving creature. She would have made any honest man as good a wife as an honest man ever got. Didn't that lawyer, Hart-Brown, who married her, didn't he know it? Why, then, did he never publicly acknowledge her as his wife?"

"Cowardice, Bellamy. He was afraid of public opinion. He thought he would lose his practice if he married a woman who had been under such a cloud. That's English, unhappily. Faith, Hope and Charity. Faith in the funds; Hope in the Stock Exchange; and Charity during the sermon on Sunday."

"I thought your people slept during the sermons."

"So they do—that's why they are then charitable."

Bellamy walked on a little while in silence—they were by the lakeside early in the month of December, yet the sun shone gloriously upon them and the distant snowy peaks were afire with the roseate pinks and the translucent greens of a beauty which the mountains only knew. Cruel that a woman's eyes should thus see the glory of the Infinite at the very hour when she was about to lose it for ever.

"The question is," Bellamy continued; "what are we to do with her money? Has she made a will, Arthur?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then she ought to without a moment's loss of time. We shall have all sorts of trouble with chancery lawyers if she does not. Get her solicitor over from England. It will cost a lot of money, but it must be done. I would gladly take charge of the child at my own expense, but it's not fair to her. Why, one of these rascals who's been making love to her may turn up and claim her money. You must do this without loss of time, Arthur. You know her solicitor, I suppose?"

"Quite well. The old firm of Hart-Brown went on after her husband's death. They are the people."

"Then cable them to-day—now. We shall never forgive ourselves if we don't."

They returned to Montreux and sent the message off. Little Sophie was in the hotel with a garland of white flowers about her neck—she had a strange passion for flowers—and danced with feet which were nimble while her governess played to her. "Mother's better," she said in a matter-of-fact way; "she laughed when I put on her great big straw hat and sang to her. Why doesn't she get up if she's better? She must know I want her."

These questions and others like them puzzled the

two patient men and they did not know how to answer them.

"She'll be a problem to us, that darling," Bellamy would surmise a little ruefully; "she's dreadfully self-centred already, Arthur. A philosopher in embryo. Whom does she take after, I wonder? Not her mother certainly."

"A strange family, Bellamy. Her uncle, old John Blake of Quainton had less learning than a village schoolmaster. A good man but a wild one. I knew little of his sister, who was Sophie's mother, but they spoke of her as a very bright lady, who managed her home well but certainly had no artistic gifts. They must come from some far back generation—if there really are such gifts in the family."

"Too early to speak of that, Arthur. We shall have to be patient. Give her a good education and then see."

"I think religion will do much for her, Bellamy."

"The right sort of religion. Not praying all day and damning yourself for your sins all night. Teach her to respect herself, Arthur, and to believe in God. I must leave that to you—but you'll leave me the other side. I want to give her a real chance in life. I can't do that if you make a mumbling nun of her."

Arthur was a little offended and he despaired.

How impossible it was to bring home to these men of the world the mystic beauties of the Catholic faith and all that Christ stood for to its devotees! What could Bellamy Renshaw ever know of the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament or the true meaning of atonement? Invincible ignorance was the only explanation.

"You'll never understand us, Bellamy, never. Have you not felt the need of religion yourself—I am sure you have. I am certain your life must often have been empty because you never sought foundations. Your God is too vague an idea to help you. You know nothing of the Eternal Vision because you have not sought it. Well, I

suppose, this was predestined. We may each serve in his own way. I was called to a different life but I cannot say why you were not—just as I confess myself unable to understand the dealings of God with men. Why have thousands of millions never heard the name of Christ? Am I to disbelieve in Christ because they have not? As well ask me to prefer dross to pure gold. You must admit that it is so?"

Bellamy answered evasively. Sometimes, he told himself he would admit anything to please this little parson, a gentle and kindly soul whom all men loved. He, himself, would never be other than a rationalist—but he would not bring up a woman that way. No, no, faith for them and the stories of wonderland if they pleased them.

"We should get the child out of Asnières and keep her down here, I think," he suggested—and then—"one place which must not educate her is England. Some adder-tongued Miss would hear the story from her mother and there might be ruin. She must never know, Arthur, not one word of it. We ought to change her name to begin with, if you agree. Wipe the whole story off the slate and tell her nothing. She should never find out if we manage things well. Seven years old, about, isn't she? Thirteen years until she is twenty-one. Who'll know anything then —if we manage cleverly?"

Arthur saw the wisdom of this.

"Why not your own name, Bellamy? Why should not she be called 'Renshaw'?"

"Or St. Just—eh, Arthur, that's a good name."

"But I'm a priest, dear fellow. Am I to admit to a daughter? No, no, 'Renshaw' is the name. He is a sinner and can bear any burdens" . . . and he laughed lightly as though the very idea of Sophie bearing his name was a jest.

"Not a word to Sophie, mind you."

"Not a word—it would kill her. I quite understand,

Bellamy. And, of course, she may live. God grant that she may!"

His prayer, unhappily was not to be answered. This mysterious wasting disease was too much for the doctors and even when Renshaw insisted on having the great specialist, Dr. Ringer, out from England and paid him a fee of five hundred pounds for coming—Sophie's solicitors assenting—no helpful opinion could be had.

Not consumption, the doctor said. A general failure of the system, perhaps the beginning of that rare disease, pernicious anæmia, which physicians had never yet been able to cure. "She may live three months"—was the verdict. In fact, she lived one.

She had made her will, sitting up in bed and trying somewhat piteously to jest about it.

"Of course it's all right and prudent and all that sort of thing," she confessed wearily, "but don't you put on airs, Bellamy dear, and think I'm going to oblige you by dying just because I'm making my will. I'm going to live a hundred years yet for Sophie's sake."

And then with fear almost tragic, she cried:

"My God, what will become of her if I am taken—the precious, the darling? I dare not leave her, Arthur, even to you—I dare not, oh, I dare not."

They comforted her with good words and when young Philip Hart-Brown, her nephew by marriage, had gone back to England, taking the precious document with him—but not until he had passed a jolly evening with a French lady, "who loved the Anglais, *mais certainement*"—and loved him to the tune of two hundred and fifty francs—she seemed a little better and had little Sophie in to read some fairy tales to her and to tell her what she had been doing all that long day. When the child left her, she wept bitterly. Oh, the nights, the dreadful nights when one dreamed.

It was just at sunset, three weeks later, that she died.

She had fallen into a deep sleep at three o'clock of the afternoon and from that she never awakened.

Little Sophie came into the hotel with a garland of pink roses about her neck and another bunch of carnations for "Mother" just at this time. She cried when they would not let her go upstairs, not understanding.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER XXXI

THE CHILDREN OF THE MARRIAGE

JOHN BLAKE, the second, had found life very difficult since that good old man, the Squire, his father died; but when he had passed his fiftieth year, his troubles became almost insupportable.

Both Helen, Countess of Wichfield and the grizzling Earl were dead by that time—and his sister was a stately widow whose children protected her nobly from care and imposture. Poor Freddy Wharton had been killed when trying one of the very first of the new motor carriages with which Paris had astonished the world, and though his wife Lucy had been left a sufficient income, all her interests in life were found in the career of her eldest son, a brilliant soldier and as distinguished an officer of the 6th Dragoons as that distinguished regiment had known.

Major Wharton would have nothing to do with his uncle, John Blake.

"That fellow is a thorough wrong 'un, Mother," he would protest, "the more money you give him, the more he will want. Why, the damned rogue has never done an honest day's work in his life. Let him go out and sweep a crossing. He's children of his own—what are they doing for him? I'll tell you this, Mother, if I find him about the house, I'll throw him out neck and crop. He's a social pest, nothing better."

Lucy suffered the rebuke; but she helped John none the less, though her own son made the money fly and her eldest

daughter was married to young Lord Kilmogne, who had not a shilling and yet must maintain an establishment of five thousand a year. Between these many claims, even Freddy Wharton's fortune was sometimes made to look shabby. And John was insatiable as his nephew said.

The letters he would write:

"LUCY DEAR,

"Do you never think of me, that was a Cambridge scholar and a gentleman once, living in this blessed slum of a Harlesden village and my own son made little better than a navvy, so help me God. There's not a coat I have to my back that a crossing-sweeper would look at, and poor Gracie, my darling wife, is little better than the slut of a servant girl to whom you wouldn't pay ten pounds a year. Have you no charity, no sisterly feeling in you? What would the world say, Lucy, if 'twas known that your own blood brother was trying to sell coals for a living and doing precious little at that? Send me fifty pounds and let me look the world in the face."

Lucy would sometimes send ten pounds upon receipt of such a letter as this, and with that money John would adjourn immediately to the neighbouring "Spotted Dog" and there indulge in a wild bout of drinking which endured until the money was spent and the drunkard was in bed or a hospital.

Good company the man was, as everybody declared, and the flavour of his Irish speech quite captivating.

That mock Irishman, Jeremy Hooker, had taught John to say "Bedad" and "Begorrah" and he retained the habit until his life's end. It served him well with strangers, who listened eagerly to his stories of Wichfield Castle and the late Countess, his aunt, and all the great things he had done there—not to speak of the wrongs he had ultimately suffered at the hands of that great family.

"To think of it—they gave me a measly thousand a year (it was really five hundred) and a house by the seaside where at one time, I am creditably informed, our great Queen Victoria had passed some days of her childhood. And what did they do, think you, when my poor aunt—that loved me like her own son—died of the typhoid fever that she caught in Paris, the year of the Exhibition? Why, they threw me into the streets as though I were a dog—me and my poor children. Did man ever hear the like of it? Hearts of stone they must have had, faith, to treat so their own flesh and blood, that was a Cambridge scholar and a gentleman. Yet, bhoys, you can never tell what the aristocracy will do. There's evil in them all—evil, I say, and it's come down to them chiefly from their mothers that were whores to a woman, as the history books tell us."

John's admirers, unhappily, were chiefly to be found in the public house. His own son, John the third, a thin cadaverous young man, who had got religion somehow, prayed for his father in the High Church at Kilburn (where he sang tenor in the choir), while his eldest daughter Gracie openly despised him, though she had lived but eighteen unhappy years.

"Letting poor mother suffer like this, oh, it's cruel. She works the very flesh off her fingers. And what for? See what father does with the money. Drink, drink, drink . . . I hate him for it—hate him," a solemn assertion, the sincerity of which, none who heard it could doubt.

This Gracie was unquestionably a beauty.

She would have been called a "platinum blonde" at a later day and unquestionably her hair was bewitchingly original and her eyes full of naughtiness. In vain had a good and religious mother endeavoured to keep the things of this world from Gracie's ken—but some bright young ladies at a neighbouring High School (to which Gracie had

been sent by the charity of her aunt) soon made it their evil business to mend that state of ignorance and did so thoroughly.

Gracie then learned that to be loved by a man was the greatest human felicity, though none of the young ladies in question had been so loved, but had merely ascertained the fact from their married sisters.

She learned also that men turned to look at her in the streets because they desired her closer acquaintance—and that none, who so turned, would desire to make a wife of her but merely a mistress.

All this wordly teaching made Gracie very sly and somewhat cunning in her dealings with young men.

Wholly upon an instinct, she resolved at an early age to get what she could out of them and to give very little in return. The occupation that she chose, that of a mannequin in a house in Clifford Street, led to some journeys' ends and occasionally to mothers' meetings. She was only just seventeen when a middle-aged stockbroker took her to dinner at the East Room of the Continental, then a secret rendezvous known to the experts, and tried to persuade her to go to a "little hotel he knew of," afterwards.

Gracie ate his dinner and then bolted home. Child as she was, she yet found the wit to say to him: "What would your wife say?" and to laugh at his subsequent confusion, for he had been careful to conceal the existence of any wife.

Six months later, while she was still innocent in the flesh though mentally corrupt, this slim and beautiful girl had the fright of her life.

She was introduced by Molly Dawson, another pretty slip of a blonde, who worked with her in Clifford Street, to an old woman named Madame Kless, who kept a manicure, hairdressing, beauty parlour kind of shop, not many yards from Bond Street.

By this old woman, own sister to the devil as surely she was, she was presented to the Count Andrea Marcel, a person of engaging manners, some physical attractions and much English gold as old woman Kless declared. The girls were often invited in to tea by this frizzed and larded old siren, and the delights which young girls can purchase from rich men were eloquently dwelt upon in language which had come in part from the city of Hamburg and in part from the brothel.

Gracie laughed at the hag but the man fascinated her.

Perhaps for the first time in her life she realized that there may be such a thing as affinity between a man and a woman and she confessed to herself that if the count really offered her his love, she would be quite unable to resist him.

Nor is this surprising when it is remembered that she had not yet attained her eighteenth year and that the man had already "offered his love" to some forty or fifty exceedingly pretty girls—and that because of that offer many of these poor creatures were dead or dying in those sinks of iniquity which disgrace the countries that harbour them, though still tolerated by governments that are indifferent.

Nobody, who did not know the count well, would have guessed his secret.

Even the police were ignorant of his calling and he was not "on the books" at Scotland Yard. A most polished person in his manners, very dark, with lustrous eyes and curly hair, he had the airs of a courtier at Versailles when the Grand Monarque reigned there—while, as for making love, there was not a rogue in Europe who so well understood the tricks of it.

How surprised this man was (or seemed to be) when he heard that the beautiful Gracie Blake was but a mannequin in a West End establishment.

"You," he cried, and his eyebrows were lifted high and his forehead wrinkled and all the evidences of great personal distress made manifest.

"But what could I do," said Gracie, "we are very poor and though father is related to an earl, his family doesn't help him and his children must go out to work."

The count shook his head. Almost there were tears in his eyes.

"Your father related to an earl and they do nothing. *C'est une unfamie. Tiens*, have I met this earl—at the house of my Ambassador perhaps, or Monsieur le Duc de Nemours—perhaps it was with his highness the Comte de Paris. I should like to know that I have met such a scoundrel and am about to meet him again. Then I would give him what you English say—a portion of my mind. That is so, *n'est-ce pas*. If you help me to meet him."

Obviously, the fellow knew nothing of these great people (unless from their footmen) and if the French Ambassador had met him, possibly that distinguished personage would have called for the police. But Gracie was properly impressed (as the man meant her to be), and when he suggested that he would give her a party at his house in Queen's Gardens, Bayswater, she really began to feel that she was of some importance even in this aristocratic company.

Old Madame Kless, of course, was all in favour of such a festivity.

She would go herself, she said, and invite other girls to make it a jolly affair. Oh, the morality of that painted and decorated hag.

"Never go to a gentleman's house alone," she advised the admiring Gracie. "The Herr Count is very strict, *certainement*, but I should be there that there may be none of what you say, the gossips, afterwards, and nobody call you the bad woman. Certainly, I shall be with you and order

the carriage . . . and I will lend you the dress and a little jewellery and you shall be the prettiest of them all—*bon*. You are a good girl and naturally I have pleasure to see you with so great a gentleman."

It was all arranged, then, for the following Sunday night.

Gracie did not tell her father the whole of the story; but she told him sufficient to pacify him.

There was to be a big social party given by a distinguished French count, a relative of one of her employers in Albemarle Street.

A "Madame Kless, awfully well known in society," was to chaperone her and some of the other girls and to see them to their homes. Of course she *ought* to go. It would be very bad for her prospects in business if she did not. To all of which, John assented, proud that his daughter should be received into such society and never forgetful of the fact that she was cousin to a Countess.

"'Tis with any in England you can hold up your head," said he; "never forget that, my child, and do not let them come it over you. Bedad, and I wish my aunt was alive for you should wear some of the jewels from Wichfield Castle. As big as pigeon's eggs, they are—and now that new countess, a nobody faith, just a brewer's daughter has got 'em round her neck though she's as big as one of her own beer barrels and a damned sight more expensive. What a world of injustice it is and me the worst used man in it, by Jasus."

This was the father's view, but the son John the third, was not so happy about it. He did not so much mind the party as the fact that it was on a Sunday.

"Going just when she ought to be at evensong," he said; "what would Mr. Clarkson say about that? He'll think we're a pretty irreligious lot, father—it won't do me much good if you really want me to get on in his business.

Why, Gracie's never been to Holy Communion for a year. I don't wonder people talk about her."

"Let 'em talk and be damned my son. I'm not denying that religion is a very good thing—far from it, and I wish I had more of it, but the world's the world and the child has got to make her way in it. Is there one of your parson friends would give her five pounds to keep her out of the gutter if she'd got there? You know there isn't. Let them have their evensong, then, and she shall have her party. The girl can go to church any day—it's not often a chance like this comes her way."

So the World and the Devil came into their own and the Flesh waited expectantly for the evening, when seven or eight willing young females would be handed over to it and "orgy" would prevail.

Gracie went to old Madame Kless's to dress and there was painted and powdered and frizzed and feathered by that cunning old woman until her own father hardly would have known her.

Nobody understood better than that old German woman how to make young girls attractive to men, and although short skirts were not for her day, she contrived more than a suggestion of sex with a cunning art which years of infamy had taught her.

Gracie, indeed, looked very much like a smart young actress when Madame had finished with her, yet an air of good breeding still clung to her and was in sharp contrast with the loud and vulgar deportment of the other "young ladies" who were to be companions in this adventure.

Perhaps not one of the five, none but the old she-devil who piloted them, knew that a house of ill-fame awaited them at their journey's end and that if any of them returned innocent to their homes that night, then it was a miracle.

Merrily enough, indeed, they went in the little private omnibus Madame had hired from the livery stables in Park Lane and happy were their faces when they reached Queen's Gardens and saw the brightly lighted house which was their destination.

As it chanced, Gracie was the first to leap out on to the wet pavement; for it was a night of November, dark and drear and misty in its air . . . and with her usual almost boyish activity she gave another leap across the stones to land upon the enamelled shoes of a pleasant man of some thirty years of age, broad-shouldered and round-faced and typically English—and one, moreover, who happened to have rung the front-door bell of that very house at the very moment of Gracie's arrival.

"Oh," said she brightly, "what a clumsy little beast I am. I do hope I haven't hurt you."

"My dear little girl, you may do it as often as you like," said he laughing—and then, as one not a little astonished, he asked: "Are you going to this party?"

"Why you silly man, of course I am. Why am I standing on this doorstep if I am not?"

"You're standing here by a great piece of luck. Come in with me and directly the course is clear you run, my dear, run like the devil and never let this place see you again. It's a brothel, child, one of the most notorious in London . . . hush, here's the old hag. Keep close to me, I'll take care of you . . ." and he drew her to him familiarly, to the great delight of old woman Kless, who thought that one of her charges already had made good and who plumed herself on such an early success.

Poor Gracie had never had such a shock since the day she was born.

Often in the idle hours in Clifford Street had she heard of such houses and their terrors—how that girls had been seduced there with violence, imprisoned

in dark rooms, spirited away to the Continent and never heard of by their friends. And she was in such a house and nobody but this unknown man to help her. Good God, what should she do? Oh, the terror, the misery, the disappointment of it all. She was half-crying already.

How clearly now she realized in a flash of thought the infamy both of the old woman and of that beast, the count, whom, subconsciously she had always both suspected and feared. The whole miscreant business was as plain as the mock diamond ring which the hag Kless had put upon her finger. A trap—nothing less than a trap. Terror shook at her very heart. She did what she had not done earnestly for many months—she prayed.

They were in the hall of the house by this time, Madame Kless kissing the Count Andrea on both cheeks and he kissing all the girls on whatever features of their faces they offered him.

Behind him, through the open door of what should have been a billiard room, a number of men in evening dress was to be seen, some half-drunk, some half-ashamed of themselves, all loud and coarse in their manner and already drinking champagne from divers sorts of glasses. Upstairs, an Italian musician was playing a waltz by Waldteufel—but the doors of two bedrooms were open and the beds very plainly to be viewed.

The unknown man held Gracie back while the others were moving on to the cloak-room and now he whispered to her, drawing her towards the front door. Kless saw the happening and chortled the more because of it. How easy the girl was and how different she had feared that she might be. Indeed, it was in good content that the woman passed on into the cloak-room and so lost sight of her charge for one momentous instant.

"I am Charles Gratton, King's Bench Walk, Temple,"

said the man; "if you ever want my help, write to me there. Where are you, my dear? What is your name?"

"Gracie Blake. I'm employed at Arnaud's in Clifford Street. Oh, I'm so frightened. For God's sake help me and I'll never forget it."

"Have you got any money? I see you haven't. Here's all my silver. Run like a boy when you get outside and take the first cab you see. Now, for it—and good luck."

He opened the door quietly and pushed her out on to the wet pavement.

As it befell, another man had just driven up to the house in a hansom cab and was paying the driver.

Gracie, in her terror and distress almost leaped on to this empty vehicle and crying quite pitifully: "Euston Station, please—I am in a dreadful hurry," she shut the doors and her eyes at the same time. Would or would they not discover her? Would the cabman take her? Oh, the doubt of it all, the horror. She could have cried aloud for joy when the driver opened the little trap at the top of the cab and asked: "Did you say Euston, miss?" He was a jolly fat-faced fellow and had five children of his own at home . . . she was safe enough with him although she did not know it.

At last, then, she heard the wheels of the cab grate against the pavement and the horse wheeled about and they were off. The man by whom she had brushed so unceremoniously, still stood on the doorstep of the count's house —the music of a waltz was still audible in the street: but Gracie was crying bitterly. The shame, the disappointment—how she repeated these words. To be taken to a brothel—she the niece of an earl! What would her mother say? How should she tell them: how explain?

The problem was still in her mind when she reached Euston and her trembling fingers unclasped on the

money which that good Samaritan Gratton had given her. The cabman could not fail to perceive her distress for she still sobbed between her words and that fat father of a family was touched at the aspect of so pitiful a figure.

"In some trouble, miss, ain't you," he remarked—and then, "is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No, no; oh, thank you—I have been taken to a dreadful house and I got away—and oh, oh—I don't know what to do, I don't, I don't. . . ."

She burst into a passion of tears at the words and the good fellow, quite shy about it all, got down from his box and began to comfort her, in horsy words, though well meant none the less.

"There, there, don't you fret miss—steady oh, and quiet's the thing. Been ill-treating you, have they? Why, it's a damned good hiding I'd have given some of them if I'd known, having daughters of my own and fine gals at that. Where do you live, miss, where are you going?"

"We live at Harlesden—I want to go to Willesden Station if there is a train——"

A porter, who had stopped to hear the strange talk, obligingly offered the unwelcome intimation that there was no train to Willesden, the last having gone a quarter of an hour previously . . . and this, indeed, would have seemed like the final misfortune if the good Samaritan in the white hat and the fancy waistcoat had not again intervened.

"'Ere, don't you make no trouble for yourself about that, miss," he cried hastily; "I'll drive you to Harlesden and your father shall pay me what he likes——"

"He will, he will; I have the money here myself," exclaimed Gracie—and ceasing to cry now that home seemed nearer, she climbed back into the cab and just three-quarters

of an hour later, cabman and girl and father and mother and son (three of them in their night attire) were all closeted together in the little parlour of John Blake's house and the amazing story was told once more with tears and oaths, with threats and with entreaties. Happily John Blake had whisky in the house and the good Samaritan was no teetotaller.

"Damnation send them all to a lousy hell," John had exclaimed already some half a dozen times.

The jehu did not put it quite that way, but was all for "transputation," a form of punishment by then erased from British law.

"A kidnapping of widows and orphans ought to be made a 'anging matter," he contended.

John helped himself to more whisky and said, "certainly." To-morrow morning, very early, he would go to Scotland Yard and lay an information. The threat alarmed Gracie *mère* terribly—all her country love of exclusiveness revolted at the idea of a "piece in the papers."

"Oh, John," she cried; "oh John"—and there was profound pathos in her tone.

Oddly enough, the cabman sided with Gracie and son John also took her part. The young man was thinking of his "choir" and what the Vicar would say and how the worshippers would take it when they learned that his sister had been taken to a brothel.

"If the papers get hold of it, there'll be a pretty fuss," said he; "my sister's name and mine all over London. What will her employers say? What will Mr. Clarkson say?"—Clarkson was the auctioneer and builder of Willesden who employed him—"you can't have that, father. Better go down and thrash the fellow, if you can find him. As to the old woman, tell the police about her if you like. But for God's sake, don't bring Gracie's name into it. You'll ruin her if you do."

John was not appeased and talked about blood and pistols and other weapons of violence almost until the cocks began to crow, but nothing came of it, of course.

Gracie was too ill to go down to her "Salon de Paris" next day, and on the following morning she was politely informed that her services were dispensed with, though what malign influence had worked this misfortune she never knew. When she went down to try to discover what was the matter, Madame Andricourt, the manageress, received her very coldly and told her plainly that the establishment was "not one of that kind."

"Anybody," she added, "who goes to the woman Kless's parties is not suitable for our employment. I need say no more. You are lucky to have kept out of the hands of the police and while I am able to make some excuse for your youth and ignorance, I certainly could not retain you in our service."

Gracie cried a little at this and was wholly mystified by the woman's knowledge. She did not understand that Clifford Street was just a hive of gossip, one girl telling of things to another girl and each anxious to get the other's job. One result of the affair was, however, obvious. When she passed Madame Kless's little shop, she perceived that it was closed. The old woman had taken time by the forelock and had vanished. Like a gang of criminals when one has squealed, she was afraid. The next day saw her on her way to Berlin and there she remained for some years, advertising for "young English ladies, who desire to learn the German language in family surroundings and under strict tutelage"—and thence she sent many a simple maiden to the isles of the Neva and the life of infamy they entailed.

John, needless to say, did not shoot the count, though he made several excursions to Bayswater and strode fiercely round the Square to which Gracie had been taken. She,

poor child, had not an idea of the number to the house of which Madame had carried her and when her father interviewed more than one pompous butler in the hope of tidings, he was received coldly enough.

"No such goings on in this Square. You'd better take yourself off, my man, and quick about it. What, looking for a brothel in Queen's Gardens—escaped from an asylum, haven't you?"

John suffered the insults meekly and usually ended his day in the refreshment room at Paddington Station, where he drank whisky freely and unbosomed himself to any casual stranger who would listen to him.

"This London is a very hell for innocent girls," he would aver. The strangers usually agreed with him and permitted him to buy them another whisky.

Gracie, the second, stopped at home meanwhile and deplored her misfortunes.

There must have been some of the father's cunning in the child, for though she had pretended to tell her parents the whole story of the Queen's Gardens affair, there was one fact she had not mentioned.

It was the address in the King's Bench Walk, Temple, which Charles Gratton, her gallant Sir Galahad had given her.

One day, despairing of life and the devastating ills of monotony, she had the brilliant idea to write to this cavalier and to thank him effusively for what he had done for her.

Charles read the letter and fell to wondering. Was the girl really an innocent or had he been a fool to do what he had done? Certainly, she was very pretty and lucky would be the man who made love to her successfully. So Charles determined to see the affair a little further and to put virtue to the proof—he was a man of the world, after all, and none of his friends called him a fool.

"Don't thank me at all," he wrote her in reply; "I only did what any decent man would have done. I should like to meet you again, for you interested me very much and I was astonished that any girl of your class could have got into such company.

"Would you care to come and lunch with me one day in my room in the Temple? We could then have a little chat about your prospects in London and, perhaps, I could be of some service to you. I shall expect you at one o'clock on Wednesday unless I hear to the contrary. Don't trouble to write if you can come."

Gracie was tremendously excited when she received the letter and it goes without saying that she made no mention of it to her father or her mother—and certainly not to her brother John.

Talk by one of the girls, who knew of a possible job, enabled her to escape from the house and although she was dreadfully shabby—for old Madame Kless had gone off with her only decent day-frock, leaving her "baby" fancy dress in its place—nevertheless she made herself as smart as she could, and her heavy cloak with the rabbit-skin collar hid the most part of her misfortunes from the prying eyes of the passers-by. She felt, indeed, that this was a chance which might never come again—and so it might have been if men were not always men and life just what it is and no more.

Gratton received her warmly in his comfortable chambers in King's Bench Walk and had a jolly little lunch ready for her.

A fat and elderly lady showed her into the bedroom to begin with—"and mind you don't look at all my pictures," said the barrister jestingly—a command which Gracie was careful to obey, though certain glimpses of half-dressed ladies

which she could not avoid, by no means suggested a Church Congress.

Unfortunately, she had to take off her cloak and that revealed her shabbiness. Gratton remarked it but tried to ignore it. Whence had "the kid" got those swell clothes she wore the other night? There was a mystery here, obviously—yet how pretty she was!

"Now," said he, when they sat down to some well-grilled soles and he poured her out a glass of sherry, "I want to hear first of all about the famous party. How did you get there and why did you go? I know, of course, how you got away and funny it was. You never heard such a cater-wauling the old woman made—said you'd gone for the police and that we should all be arrested and the devil knows what. Some of us insisted on stopping all the same—I was one, though I found it dull enough after you had gone."

He laid a little emphasis upon the words, as one who should say, "Of course you were the real attraction"; but though Gracie blushed she pretended not to notice it.

"I went because some of the girls at Arnaud's went—I work as a saleswoman and mannequin in Clifford Street, you know—they knew old Madame Kless and she introduced me to the Count Marcel."

"Count be damned. He's one of the most notorious pimps in London. Shouldn't wonder if he weren't in the White Slave trade if the truth were known—well, he asked you to Queen's Gardens, I suppose!"

"Madame Kless said he did. She lent me the dress I went in and I never got my day-frock back. That's why I look so shabby to-day. Do you really mind?"

Gratton did not mind at all. He liked her simplicity —and her voice. The mystery was still to be solved.

"Did your father know you were going to such a place?"

"Oh, no; he thought it was a party given by Madame

Andricourt. You see, he's very particular where I go, for although we are so poor, my aunt was a countess and the present earl is my first cousin."

The intimation took Charles Gratton wholly by surprise. He had expected to hear of decent relations: but an earl!

"What earl?" he asked almost savagely . . . whilst his scanty chestnut eyebrows shot up as it were, to the very ceiling of his forehead.

"Oh, we come of the Wichfield family, you know. My great aunt was the last countess. She used to be very good to us, but since she died we've been very badly off. My father is too ill to work and mother has to let us do things we ought not to do, considering our family. It's a wicked thing, but, of course, I didn't come here to tell you all about it. I'm sure you understand that. . . ."

Gratton quite understood it. The girl was an "innocent" but a very pretty one. Like most men of his time, he dearly loved a lord . . . and here was a countess's cousin going begging. He must reconsider his attitude towards her.

"Surely, there's something better that you can do than this dressmaking," he said—a rare hand at a cross-examination he was—"hasn't your father any influence with politicians and people? He should have, with his connexions. Why, if you were my daughter, I'd make you secretary to a duke in no time. It's simply preposterous that you should be working in a dress-shop."

Gracie blushed again with real pleasure. Such a man to take such an interest in her! And to speak of the possibility of being his daughter! Why, he could not be much more than thirty-five (though he had seemed younger on that famous evening), and while his sandy-coloured hair was retreating unstrategically from his forehead, he really was not ill-looking.

"I know it's hard," she admitted . . . "but we have so few friends in London——"

"You have men friends, my dear, I'll be bound——"

"Oh, indeed, I have not. I know nobody at all. Will you believe that the affair the other night was really the only party I have been to since we came to London. It couldn't be worse if I were a nun."

"It would be better than going to places like Queen's Gardens. No more of that kind of thing if you please."

Gracie said: "Certainly not"—she flushed scarlet at the very thought of it. The man, on the contrary, was thinking of a scheme. He meant Gracie no ill: but, really, it was not in human nature to part with so pretty a bird.

"I'll tell you what," he observed presently; "there's a new penny paper being started in Fleet Street here and I've put a couple of thousand into it. I go down there two or three days a week and I have a room all to myself. They lend me a secretary fellow, but he's rather a common kind of chap. Now, if you were to learn shorthand and type-writing——"

"Oh, but I know it pretty well. I learned both at the High School at Willesden before I went to Clifford Street. Not that I'm very quick—don't think that, please, but I'm sure I could soon get it back—and, oh, it would be wonderful to work for a newspaper!"

"Not so wonderful as you think. Not for this newspaper, anyway. We publish little bits of nothing and we have a serial story all about princesses and their love affairs. It'll make you laugh—about a thousand miles from real life and as comic. Look here, I'll speak to them about it if you like. Of course, you must ask your father . . . and you'll want clothes."

Gracie turned all hot and cold at that—she was deplorably shabby and she knew it, and, for the life of her, she could not imagine whence clothes could come. Charles was in

no such ignorance. He knew the name of the man who would buy her clothes very willingly.

"We'll go up west afterwards and see about it," he declared cheerfully, "don't you worry. You can pay me some time. I've plenty of money and it's nothing to me. Tell your people I've arranged to pay it out of your salary. Now come along and we'll get a hansom. Have you been in one of these stink-pots, these motor-cabs yet? No? Well, I hate 'em like poison. Give me the good old horse and let me drive like a gentleman, as my father did. Shall I help you with your cloak—a pretty hat you've got and a pretty mouth to go with it. That's a kiss, my dear—don't mind about it, for we're going to be real friends, I can see."

The kiss was unlike any salute that Gracie had yet received and it thrilled her strangely.

Here was a *real* gentleman, as she told herself consolingly, and, after all, it was no great sin to kiss a man who had been kind. Gracie, indeed, was rather ashamed of the fact that she had responded to this osculatory gesture with some warmth and that he had not been ignorant of the fact. There was no mending this, however, and so they went through the Temple to the Strand together.

It was early December now and the shops aglare with the gilt and tinsel of Christmas make-believe. Bond Street flashed a myriad rays of dazzling light out upon the screen of London's mists and the old Burlington Arcade showed sham diamonds and real prostitutes in equal profusion. Everybody seemed to move merrily and to look into shop windows with the air of those who had convinced themselves that they must buy *something*. In the street itself great barouches and modest broughams moved in one long procession—and from their windows duchesses and those who were not duchesses cast haughty glances upon the canaille of the pavement.

A cosmopolitan world truly—false alike in its looks

and in its laughter. A world of pride, jealousy, and all the deadly sins. But also of some noble virtues, both aloft in the carriages and going meekly afoot amid the multitude.

Here Charles Gratton took Gracie Blake shopping. Here he put her to some little shame by declaring that fine underlinen was among her needs.

CHAPTER XXXII

ANOTHER CHILD IS EDUCATED

FEW children, surely could have been educated as was Sophie Hart-Brown.

A priest and a philosopher were her guardians and between them they divided her body and her soul.

To begin with, Bellamy Renshaw boldly insisted that she should take his name.

"There was trouble enough in the mother's life that we should want her to know of it later on," he insisted firmly. "What with the mad affair in Kensington and this American Indian fellow who pretended to marry her mother, God knows what she'd have to put up with if she carried the name the law has given her. No, Arthur, I'll make her my own daughter and see to it that 'Renshaw' is her name henceforth. You'll have no objection to that I make sure."

Arthur St. Just had never had any objection and the idea always pleased him.

"The one thing I would ask is that she grows up a happy woman and lives in the fear of God. Nothing else matters, Bellamy. You are a man of the world and the proper one to judge of such things. If you care to add this burden to your life."

"Man, it's no burden at all. I loved her mother though I never told her so, and I love the child for her sake. She shall be as my own and I'll devote my life to her. Why not, then, under the name I bear?"

"No reason at all, Bellamy. Have you any reason at all to believe that her father might trouble her?"

"Every reason, Arthur. She will come into seventy thousand pounds on her twenty-first birthday. Do you think a rogue like that will not get to hear of the fact sooner or later. I must be ready for him and other scoundrels who would rob her. Luckily, the police of three countries are my friends. Always think of that Arthur—never quarrel with the police if you can help it," and he laughed lightly at the mere thought of this true saint in trouble with authority.

Arthur divided his days at this time between his nursing sisterhood at Windsor and the little villa above the lake of Geneva where they had made a home for Sophie. He would come to Switzerland for a month, cross-examine Sophie anent her religious knowledge and then go back quite happily to England.

Bellamy, on the other hand, never mentioned Christ or God though he sometimes spoke of the Great Spirit.

His stories were all of wonderland. He peopled the mad mountains with sylphs and fauns and dwelt in palaces of dreams where the walls were of diamonds and the carpets of gold.

Always in his background was the horned dragon who would snap up the weak and the foolish but leave the wise to their wisdom. That animal should stand for "man" in the years to come. No trick nor falsehood nor flattery in man's armoury should be unknown to Sophie Renshaw when she stood to face the world alone. And he taught her by symbols, joyous laughter and light, and singing and dancing for his palaces—but prudence and stealth and watchfulness when she ventured into the woods where the dragon lay.

"Do you like this play-acting, Sophie?" he asked her sometimes, "do you like to sing and dance?"

"Yes, yes," she would say; "I like to think that thousands

of people are watching me and listening—as we listened that night when you took me to the opera in Paris. Oh, how wonderful it was. Another world, Bellamy—you said so; you were just as excited as I was and you know it."

She was fourteen at this time and the years had rolled by pleasantly enough. Bellamy felt a little shamefaced about it when Arthur died quite suddenly one morning and the whole burden of Sophie's education fell unexpectedly upon him.

Poor Arthur St. Just! He died at his little altar by Windsor Forest as he would have wished to die, and while many thousands followed him to the grave, few of them had ever raised their voices in his honour while he lived.

When he was gone, Bellamy took Sophie away from the convent at Montreux which had educated her; and sent her for a year to Leipzig.

"All this praying's no good to her," he argued with himself; "she's either got religion or she'll never get it. I believe there's music in her and Leipzig will bring it out if there is. Anyway, I don't mean to make a nun of her and the sooner she thinks of something else the better."

His devotion to the child was intense, the one passion of his life, an affection almost terrible in its anxieties and its hopes.

Willingly would he have had her about the house always if his duty to her had not forbidden the sacrifice of her education and her prospects.

How he listened for her step when she came home; watched her with the eyes of a patient, loving dog—anticipated her every need yet never with any outward expression of emotion or delight!

She, in her turn, grew to love him to the point almost of desperation. The pettiest of her troubles sent her clinging to him. There was no thought of her life, sleeping or

waking that she did not share with him. He had made her call him "Bellamy" at an early moment—but often she would say, "Bellamy dearest" and she really meant it.

Meanwhile, he fought her possible troubles though little enough she knew about them.

One day, while she was with the "English family" at Leipzig and he had gone to the apartment he had taken in the Avenue Hoche at Paris, a weird individual called upon him and said he was her father.

"George Washington Addy, sir, of whom you may have heard. I have come for my daughter, sir, to take her back to God's own country, where she will be, I hope, an ornament to me and to my religion."

"To your what?" asked Bellamy with some heat—he had become strangely hard of hearing that morning. George Washington Addy fingered his very wide-brimmed Quaker hat and repeated—"my religion."

"I have been a Christian man all my life, sir, thank God," he went on; "and to a Christian home I take her——"

"And her money, of course."

The Christian coughed in a very worldly way.

"For all that you have done for her, sir, you have a father's thanks and blessing. Her dear mother—alas that malicious and slanderous tongues separated those who had sworn their troth before God's altar—but such is the way of the world and of such are Satan's missioners—her mother, I understand, left her seventy thousand pounds which in our money is a little less than three hundred and fifty thousand dollars and will permit me to give her that education and upbringing which is her right. So, I guess, I shall take her to America by the first boat that sails and I will thank you to perdooce her that I may tell her so."

"Indeed," observed Bellamy sweetly; "how interesting. She, unfortunately, is about a thousand miles from here at the present moment and so there must be a little delay.

Meanwhile, let me think a moment. You, I understand, are the George Washington Addy who went through a bigamous marriage with the late Sophie Hart-Brown, having amused yourself previously in the same way at Chicago, Baltimore, and Jacksonville——"

"Hell, sir, what is this you are saying?"

"Permit me, Mr. George Washington Addy, alias Ben Carew, the gold-share tout, alias Angel Luke who ran the 'Abode of love' in San Francisco, and got shot in the arm and leg by a devout disciple, alias—but why go on."

And then, raising his hand dramatically, he pointed a finger at the opposite wall of the room and asked George Washington a question.

"Do you see that little iron safe against the wall? Well, I have your life story there Mr. Washington or General Lee or Colonel Grant or whatever damned name you now give yourself. And if you are a wise man, you will be out of Paris in twenty-four hours and never let me see your face again. If you do, by God I'll riddle you like a sieve and that's my last word upon it."

The reverend one showed no fight at all. He just took his Quaker hat and his Quaker gloves and went off to a *brasserie* to wash the flavour of Bellamy Renshaw from his mouth. Nevertheless, he continued to hang about Paris, still hoping that some turn of fortune might put Sophie and her money in his way—but he little knew the man he had to deal with nor his influence in Paris.

Bellamy sent for Carl Dulac, the greatest agent of the *Sûreté* that the city then possessed and to him he told the story. Many a glorious night had these two known together in the old time, and many a thousand-franc note had Bellamy slipped into his friend's hand before that matchless detective found his true *métier*.

"Carl," he now said, "there's a fellow in Paris trying to blackmail me about the little girl I've adopted. His

story is here. Her mother left it among her other papers. Whether Paris can do anything about him, I don't know, but Carl, old friend, if anything is to be done, I know you'll do it."

Carl thrust the papers almost carelessly into his pocket, warned the police of Spain, Italy, and Switzerland within the hour, and in two, had George Washington Addy before a Commissaire.

Three years previously the man had visited Paris in the company of an elderly American woman, whose last dollar he had spent. When he deserted her, and her friends carried her back to New York, he had stopped on at the Hôtel Clermont and forgotten to pay his bill.

So, it was not for grave crimes but for pettifogging frauds that the rogue went to the prison of La Roquette and there spent twelve months in uncongenial labour. They deported him to America afterwards and neither France nor little Sophie knew him more.

This problem of telling Sophie the real story of her life remained, however, and perplexed Bellamy greatly. Often he wished that Arthur St. Just were alive.

She had to know and yet how the man feared that knowledge might wean her from him.

Frequently, as her twenty-first birthday drew near, he emphasized his own philosophy of life.

"Be true to yourself always, Sophie, and you'll meet with little harm in the world. Remember that if men betray women, women betray men. Never talk about Destiny compelling you to do this, for the mind can be greater than its destiny. If the prayers to the Great Spirit, which dear Arthur taught you, are of help in making your life, never forget to say them. But be independent of man and of woman. Be yourself, Sophie Renshaw, able to look the whole world in the face and to say 'Yes' or 'No' in terms none can fail to understand."

The greater problem was faced later.

Sophie was nineteen years of age at this time and while it could not be said of her that she promised to become an unusually beautiful woman, there was a fascination about her which few men could resist.

By no means of the "petite" type, she had inherited a magnificent constitution from her mother, was broad of hip and bosom, and developed like some child of the south whose maturing the suns foster so sensually.

Her hair had become of that gold-red hue which the Italians adore and her flesh was white as ivory, and purer. Blue grey eyes, a true Grecian nose, and a mouth by no means ridiculously small, fitted this attractive setting to perfection, and, indeed, nature had done fairly by her—and if the whole suggested grace and dignity and restraint rather than passion and maternity, many found her the more winsome for that appeal and wondered not at Bellamy Renshaw's infatuation.

"A glorious creature," the men said. Emotional women spoke of her as "queenly." Her music master at Leipzig saw that she had a voice.

Bellamy seized upon his opinion as though Fortune had thrust a staff into his hand.

A voice! And the speaker one of the greatest authorities in Europe.

Three weeks after, she was singing before the great Jean de Reszké in Paris.

"Von Hortzer is right," said he. "Let her study quietly for a couple of years and I will take her. But no hot-house work, mind you, no forcing. Let her be under Von Hortzer for a year and then let her work in Paris. I think she has a future—but don't promise her one. These young voices so often disappoint us. Spare her any illusions."

Bellamy carried the message back but he took good care that illusions should not be born at Leipzig.

"Your master says you can sing, my dear. Would you like to go on with that?"

"If I should like it, Bellamy; you know it's the one ambition of my life. Oh, my dear, do you really mean it?"

"It would be a career, Sophie. I should like to think you had one great big thing to do in your life. Some day, you'll understand—and, of course, I am getting old."

"No, no, no, darling, you are so young to me—I can't think of you as my father. You are my dearest brother, Bellamy."

"Ah, but I know how old I am, Sophie. Well, it can't be helped and the man who rails upon age is like the Dane who tried to keep out the sea. What I'm thinking of is, how good for me it would be if you could work under Jean de Reszké for a year and we could be in Paris together for a time——"

"Do you think there's anything I would like better than that—oh, you can't. Bellamy, you can't. Say it's arranged dear, say that we simply must do it. I shall die of disappointment if you don't—Bellamy!"

They kissed upon it—a common thing for them to do whenever their emotions were awakened—and the great German teacher was informed immediately of their intention.

"It is good," he said pompously—and then falling to the English tongue, as he did sometimes—"I a great artiste will make her; I promise. But set to work must we, it is indispensables."

Curiously, the voice which Sophie had produced suddenly —it seemed to her from nowhere—was not a soprano but a magnificent contralto suggesting an embryo Calvé or Trebelli—and although contraltos do not make as much money as sopranos, Bellamy was glad of the fact since competition would be less.

"If I spend half my fortune, I'll have her on in 'Carmen' at La Scala"; he resolved.

What a *première* that would be for him and for her!

Surely if the spirits of the dead could return to earth, her mother would be there.

Oh, he saw it all so clearly—the great stage, the vast auditorium—the flowers—the wonderful audience—and his Sophie the centre of the brilliant scene. A night to live for.

One obstacle alone stood between him and this triumph of the visions.

The story of her life.

He must tell it to her—he alone.

The risk of telling might be terrible yet he dare not shirk the task. Someone would take his place sooner or later when she stood famous before the world. Again, how much he wished that dear Arthur St. Just had lived to take this burden from him. No story that he told was dreadful because the Spirit of the Eternal and of Destiny animated his every mood. He, Bellamy, was a mere philosopher—"and good God," he could exclaim, "what is man's philosophy worth all said and done."

One night he told her.

A night of June in their garden of roses at Montreux, she sat with her hand in his while the moonlight played on the still waters.

She knew already that he was not her real father but had adopted her. Now he spoke of her dead mother and of her unhappy life.

"One of the sweetest women that ever lived, Sophie, but 'weak as water.' When she was quite a child, her half-brother was hanged by accident in a garden at Kensington and your mother had the mad idea that she could have saved him and didn't. It was the purest delusion for she could have done nothing. Just nerves which, by the mercy of God, will never trouble you, I hope. Be strong, my dear. Put all silly fancies behind you. Facts only should count in life. You, in similar circumstances,

would, I hope, have said: 'What nonsense, I couldn't save him, nobody could have done.' Your dear mother was different, and that awful business altered her whole life. I've written it all down for you and you must read it with courage. You've no love for me if you don't. Sophie, I've striven all the time to give you mental strength and if you haven't got it, well, I'm a failure."

"You couldn't be that, Bellamy."

"Then all that you read will merely make your own life simpler. One thing above all I implore you. If the man who was your father ever comes to Paris or even to Europe, refuse to see him, and go to the police. He did your mother a wrong for which nothing can atone. Have him out for the felon he is. Never speak to him or see him if you can help it, whatever the consequences."

She promised as he wished. It was enough that he had willed it to make her will it also. He taught her how to think, and by thinking, to act. For both of them there had been glorious hours of perfect intimacy when no brother or sister could have understood each other more surely.

So she read the story of her mother's life as a clever writer could present and edit it.

No angel emerged from the pages, but a woman wholly sweet and human, and one to inspire love as few inspired it. A touch of dear Arthur St. Just added to the recital just that fragrance of the sheep and the shepherd which honesty demanded.

"All we like sheep have gone astray."

There had been human weakness but no sin. Bellamy did not believe in sin—he merely loathed what was corrupt and blackguardly. And his passion for honesty was a mania.

Sophie perceived this when she read the story; but for many days she never spoke either of the biography or the subject. She had fallen to a strange silence, and seemed quite suddenly to have assumed a pathetic dignity which

was rather that of the grown woman than the child. She even ceased to sing and that alarmed Bellamy exceedingly.

What had he done? Should he have left these secrets in their grave, to be heard of no more until the day of judgment! Had he been wholly wrong to speak of the dead past at all? If the shock were too much for her? He feared that and passed sleepless nights. Why did she not speak to him about it; ask him questions, even thank him for what he had done.

This silence—this melancholy was insupportable. He must somehow ascertain what she thought.

Nearly a week passed before she spoke and then without antiphon or gradual.

They had come in from the lake one day bearing flowers and with the fire of suns still in their eyes. Somehow in laying the blossoms down, her face came very near to his and she perceived the sadness of his eyes. In an instant she was in his arms and weeping.

"Dearest," she cried; "oh God, I have given you pain —Bellamy, my dear, and you are all I have in all the world. Speak to me, tell me—what have I done, dear, why do you look like that?"

She clung to him passionately and for a long while he could not comfort her.

Thereafter, however, the old way of living came back to them; and though she had grown mentally as though years had passed, the child in her was happily unchanged.

Often now they talked about her dead mother. A hundred questions she asked. Were the portraits Bellamy had given her really like her. Was her work really clever —just pretty poetry, perhaps, and the gift to invent stories.

Her grandfather she had been told was dead; but what of that second wife of his, that Italian woman, who had been such a beast. Was she alive, and where?

"And what would she think of me if she saw me,

Bellamy?" she asked with that speculative curiosity which affects women even when they are young. He was alarmed by this for he had never thought of it.

"I don't know where she is," he said, "and little I care. You'll never see her anyway; and if you do, you'll take good care to keep out of her way, she being not a very desirable lady. Put such ideas out of your head, Sophie. It's only weak-minded people who worry their heads with possibilities. You might as well ask me what you should do if the Shah of Persia proposed marriage to you. He's a number of wives, I believe. Why not another?"

She laughed at this and so did he.

But the words set him wondering.

What would she do or say if Greville Fordacre's wife met her face to face and told her she was the daughter of a murderess?

Good God, he had never thought of that.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CARMEN

Sophie Renshaw appeared as "Carmen" at the Opera House in Milan in the year 1893.

Her success was satisfying but presently to become a matter of operatic history.

For one thing, while she had her voice, she had not the spontaneous savagery of the Spaniard nor did she suggest the passionate abandon of the south.

The beauty of her voice and the grace and elegance of all her movements, however, captivated the critics, who declared that in other rôles she would be famous and that triumphs lay in waiting for her. As Bellamy had invited them all to a great banquet after the performance, the eulogies may have been a little over-coloured.

But that she did succeed and that the whole operatic world came to acknowledge her, history has recorded.

Never had Bellamy known such weeks as those of the rehearsals at La Scala.

He spent his moderate fortune like water to win her success and she, simple child, never guessed the truth of it. Terribly in earnest, she worked like a slave but never lost her head.

"For both our sakes, dear," she said; "oh, I have prayed, prayed, prayed, that we may succeed. Believe in prayer, Bellamy, say that you believe in it."

He promised to believe in anything that would win the crown for her—and it may be that he prayed also to that

sweet Cecilia and to Master Orpheus and his lute. Nothing would he spare for her sake. She would have given her life to make him happy.

The promise had been good all along. Jean de Reszké believed in her, as he should have done since he had taught her. The great Richter declared that she was beginning well—even that all-potent magnate of Covent Garden, Harry Higgins, declared his intention of engaging her for the coming season in London.

Yet a fearful doubt hovered about Bellamy and was with him day and night.

How, if some trick of fortune cheated them even yet.

The casual words she had uttered at Montreux still haunted him. Foolish words for her to speak and him to remember. The wife of Greville Fordacre, the Italian woman! What would she say if she knew of this. Why, such a virago might rise in the very theatre and cry "Murderess!" Such a cry would mean death to both of them. He knew it well.

Three weeks before the performance, Dulac, his old friend of the *Sûreté* came to Milan at his call and set to work to discover, if possible, just where the woman was.

Already he had ascertained that she had quitted London two years previously, and was supposed to be in Italy. The mere fact terrified Bellamy.

"Find out where she is, spare no money, Carl. I must know, I must."

This was well enough but the quest was not easy. The "first night," that tremendous event, was at hand, still there were no tidings.

Bellamy suffered the terrors of the damned; yet laughed at himself for his suffering.

"Fool," he said, again and again, "probably she does not even know that Sophie had a child."

Yet, there it was, and there was Sophie singing gloriously

and there was the vast audience applauding—diamonds a-glitter and beautiful women wearing them: men who said: "What a gem of a woman for a prima donna."

Bellamy trembled as he listened. He was hardly aware that Dulac had crept into the box and slipped a note into his hand. When he read it, he laughed aloud despite the music.

> "Maria Linge, an Austrian woman born at Trieste, the wife of the late Greville Fordacre of Kensington, is now living at Esseg in Hungary, where her daughter is married to the Chevalier Mirourty and has a son by him. The woman is quite an invalid and has not left the Castle for nearly two years."

Bellamy tore the paper into shreds—then he heard an attendant summoning him, for the opera was over and the people were still applauding the singer who had done so well.

Before, however, he could reach the stage, Sophie, running to meet him in the *coulisse*, threw her great white cloak of ermine aside and without a word, she put her arms about him and kissed him on the mouth.

She knew then but he did not—that whatever her road in life, he must take it also if happiness were to come to her.

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